

Rochester Retold: Rochester's Not-So-Abandoned Subway

[A spray paint can is shaken then sprayed]

QUAJAY

"...Dark, scary, the unknown. But there's a light at the end of the tunnel. And you look at a wall, and you think to yourself 'I wonder how many layers is behind this one piece.' You see the colors, the light comes from both sides there..."

CLEVELAND

"So the first time we went down there, I just remember being a little scared almost. Because it's like, you're underneath a city, and you're in the dark. There's the unknown and there's also the unknown because you're not sure what kind of art you're gonna encounter. There's a lot of beautiful historic work down there."

SKATE PARK INTERVIEWEE

"They were gonna build a public transport system in the 70s or 80s, and they never got around to finishing it. So, there's a couple miles of tunnel underneath the city that basically run along the entirety of downtown..."

[sound of Genesee falls near the subway, slowly fades, but still in the background of dialogue]

STELLA

In between the beloved southern food chain,
Dinosaur Barbeque, and the equally beloved
Rochester Public Library runs the Court Street
bridge.

Cross that bridge, make a right, towards the old
aqueduct. Go down this well-paved, well-kept
walkway, where you might pass a pair of joggers,
or some businessmen taking lunch along the water.

[Fade in running water sounds]

HAILIE

Follow it for a minute until you reach
a set of stairs leading up past Blue
Cross Arena. Don't take them. Turn to
your right, where the railing bows out,
and the platform extends slightly over
the water. You'll notice one of those
large curved cutouts is perfectly
positioned against the platform, with a
waist-high railing.

Jump it.

[Sound of feet landing from the jump]

Come on, just swing your leg over.

STELLA

{Mysterious music starts slowly}
You should now find yourself in a long
cavern. There's so much dust on the
ground that you can't even feel the
floor in some places.

HAILIE

Depending on the day, your nose isn't
having that much fun either, catching
the same unsatisfactory smells that
plague modern subway systems.
But...you're here for your eyes.

STELLA

For about a mile, you'll walk through a
living, changing museum of everything
from doodles to murals. You'll see what
was clearly a burst of boredom
spray-painted right next to a work that
could only have taken hours. And both
of them will blow you away.

HAILIE

Welcome to what has come to fill the
walls of Rochester's abandoned subway.

[Mysterious music picks up speed and volume,
sounds of water slightly in the background.
Something soft, wind-like, mood is light and
oddly nostalgic, carries through until just
before the subway sound]

JASON

I'm Jason Lee.

STELLA

I'm Stella Wilkins.

HAILIE

And I'm Hailie Higgins. This is Hear
UR, Season 4: Rochester Retold. Episode
5, Rochester's Not-so-Abandoned
Subway.

[Music ends]

CLEVELAND

"When the pandemic kind of hit, there wasn't any
opportunity to sit in the news room [...] so I've been
doing a lot more hiking and as i've started doing more
hiking I've been doing more exploration around
Rochester and realized that there's this amazing
history over the last 40 years of graffiti and public
art – whether it be wall therapy with the 100 plus
murals they've commissioned around the city...."

[Quick fade out and then voice over]

HAILIE

This is Will Cleveland, a journalist
for the Democrat and Chronicle by day,
and graffiti art enthusiast...also by
day, but usually on his off hours.

Cleveland's made a habit of documenting
the many murals decorating countless
walls around the city. But Rochester's

works stretch far beyond the officially
organized. People of all walks of life
mark their temporary presence
permanently against every city's walls,
in momentary color, words, and images.

CLEVELAND

They blessed me enough with, you know,
kind of telling me about some of their
secret spots are. So when I post things
I don't tag the locations, cause I want
to keep the integrity of some of these
abandoned spaces. So, that's kind of
where it started, and then it just
became, like 'I'm just gonna start
posting on Instagram,' because it's fun
to find all these things, but it's also
more fun to show people undiscovered
beauty in the city of Rochester.

STELLA

So, what does it mean when graffiti, an
act of expression that was previously
interpreted as a sign of social
decline, becomes a defining feature of
a city?

[Slow, upscale urban piano and guitar]

What does it mean to view these
expressions as works of art, and where
did it all begin?

[Enter drums into existing music]

QUAJAY

"So I've heard it was the 70s and 80s. Some people found it in the 90s. Some are going down there, you know, last weekend. So it's kind of this really cool ever-evolving space."

STELLA

This is Quajay Donnell, a photographer and writer especially interested in the public art scene. Among many other things, he works with Wall\Therapy, a public art project that strives to bring murals to all parts of the city, in an effort to build community.

QUAJAY

"A lot of what I heard originally was it was a place that provided sunlight, and you could work during the day, but you wouldn't be bothered because no one knew you were there. So it provided, you know -- when you think of street art, when you think of graffiti, a lot of times the artist who are creating may not have the art supplies or the money to go out and buy art supplies like canvas or other things of that nature. So they are going down into these spaces and creating and really practicing. The subway provided a lot

of that, and it still provides a lot of that, where a lot of public artists are still doing a lot of the street art: uncomissioned pieces, unsanctioned pieces, you know...illegal, to an extent. But they're creating and they're using their voice, their talent to do that."

[Music transition. Lighter, inspirational guitar. Fades slowly but still audible as Stella comes in]

STELLA

Although it's labeled the "abandoned subway," this-mile-and-a-half of underground space is anything but. There are decades of paint covering every single inch of concrete. There may be abandoned items, like beer cans, paint cans, and the occasional suitcase, but the trails of footprints and the smell of wet paint reveal a space that is very much alive.

HAILIE

The subway has been defunct for so long, it's been a home to street art longer than a hub of public transportation. And much like how the graffiti was a matter of happenstance, the original development of the subway was born out of opportunity rather than deliberate planning.

[sound of tracks and an old train car passing by. Focus on the sound of the mechanics. Layer in the sound of a river. Fade as dialogue comes in.]

HAILIE

Before the turn of the 20th century,
there was a second body of water
cutting through the heart of Rochester:
the Erie Canal. But by 1919, the last
boat had sailed through the city locks,
and the canal had been rerouted
elsewhere, leaving behind a vast cavern
running through the rest of downtown,
and a massive stone structure on Broad
street.

That same stone structure, formally The
Second Genesee Aqueduct, where the Erie
Canal was carried over the Genesee
River, now houses almost all of the
ever-changing walls of graffiti today.

STELLA

To make use of the caverns already in
place, the Subway was laid over this
former canal. And similar to how
"abandoned subway" is a bit of a
misnomer really referring to a
"mile-long stretch of graffiti art,"
the "Rochester Subway" of the 20th
century is a misnomer for what was, in
reality, roughly eight miles of

above-ground rails, and a measly one and a half miles of actual underground traveling. Were it built today, the term "Light rail" might be a little more appropriate.

HAILIE

Whatever you want to call it, the public transit system was both the mark of a booming city, and a blessing to workers living in a time before the ubiquitousness of the automobile.

The start of the subway is clear -- formally opened in 1927 -- but it's decline is a bit more complicated. Over the next four decades, it would change ownerships, routes, and functions several times.

[Enter chill lo fi style background music]

The last public transportation trip was made in 1956, but some portions were used to transport goods up until 1996.

During that same time, portions of the subway were turned into sections of expressways I-490 and I-590.

It's fitting that the subway doesn't have a neat conclusion, since the space has cycled through so many different functions. In another city, it might not have been forgotten, and it may never have had the chance to house the proof of life it currently does.

Today, it's become a well-known space for the community to come together and create, to leave their mark on a concrete canvas.

STELLA

The art that's made within these walls is a meditation in temporality. No work is safe for long, but they aren't meant to be. In the same way, the space itself has been a permanent structure, with temporary uses.

[Light transition sound/music, soft but upbeat, moving]

UNNAMED GRAFFITI ARTIST INTERVIEW

"Everyone comes here to paint. It's kinda a good local spot where everyone comes. They just get to do 'legal' graffiti, and just paint, and enjoy themselves."

CLEVELAND

"It's the nature of the art, it's all ephemeral. And I think the graffiti writers and the muralists and the artists would admit

that too -- you know? They don't expect their work to last forever. "

[The previous train sound effect played in reverse]

HAILIE

In 2018 the City of Rochester started to develop plans to revitalize the city by creating more communal spaces running along the Genesee river. This project, ROC the Riverway -- that's R-O-C the Riverway -- hopes to create attractive pedestrian-focused walkways, better serve the disabled community, and provide water-oriented development to attract new employers and workers.

STELLA

The proposal of over a dozen river-side projects by former mayor, Lovely Warren, received a 50 million dollar state grant from former governor Andrew Cuomo.

You can find more details about this project at: city of rochester dot gov, forward slash R-O-C the riverway.

One of the first tasks on their long list of projects is the complete reimagining of the aqueducts and subway space. They hope to remove the top deck

of the Broad Street Bridge and make it an uncovered walkway, the final point in the already-in-existence Genesee River Trailway.

[Guitar strums]

CLEVELAND

"I'm really heartbroken about that. I mean I understand why they're doing it, and I think it has the potential to be really cool. But it's sad to me that graffiti writers are going to lose this form that they've had for decades."

STELLA

As an artist, Quajay's main concern is that this plan keeps the preservation of art in mind.

QUAJAY

"It's interesting. I think part of those processes are always interesting. I have not reviewed the plan in detail, but I know there are parts of the plan -- including the apartment that [inaudible]. They removed art and removed pieces, right? And I think when you go into a space and remove something that was there, something that is really connected to folks, you have to have another plan."

And I think any plan should include elements of public art, right? It shouldn't be an active thought, shouldn't be a 'Okay, people are very upset right now, let's wrap this into the plan.' It should be recognizing the importance of that space for decades, and saying, 'You know what? How can we include some of these folks, include some of these elements, in whatever design we have.'

HAILIE

After hearing that the physical space of the abandoned subway would be phased out in the next few years, I was devastated. I don't know why -- the works change frequently anyway. They're meant to be ephemeral. So, what does it matter if a few of them go down at once?

When I heard the subway was going to close, my mind jumped to, of all places, my high school environmental science class.

One of the few things I learned that actually stuck with me was that there's this thing called a background extinction rate. Extinction is a normal part of evolution - by virtue of

environmental changes, natural selection, and the cruel cruel world of the animal kingdom, some species just don't make it. This is normal.

It only becomes a problem when that rate unnaturally spikes. Say, in the form of a comet that wipes out 99% of living things. Or, in the face of global warming, as areas rapidly become inhospitable.

The subway has a background extinction rate, works cropping up and disappearing just as fast. But I couldn't help myself from mourning catastrophe in the form of ROC the riverway.

STELLA

Although the subway may be the biggest house of graffiti art, as Will told us, it's not the only one.

CLEVELAND

'I mean I'm familiar with what they're gonna do, I understand why they're gonna do it. They've been talking about the abandoned subway since the subway closed in the 1950s. It's been sitting vacant for that long, probably slowly deteriorating. So something needs to be

done to strengthen the infrastructure, I'm sure. But like I said, it saddens me that they're gonna lose a form. But, you know, if we learned nothing else from graffiti writers it's that they're very resourceful, and I'm sure they will find a new spot. You see tons of work up at the Cobbs Hill water towers, the empty water towers. There's different spots in and around town. Kind of adds to that rotating art gallery quality that you get.

STELLA

At the same time, the abandoned subway was never meant to last. It's smack in the center of downtown, it couldn't stay forgotten forever.

The art that canvases the subway walls are not necessarily meant to have the spotlight, either in the city or in comparison to their neighbors. What makes the space so impressive is the volume of creation collected.

HAILIE

Admittedly, not every "John was here" scrawled hastily by the hands of an amateur is going to take your breath away. But it's seeing the "John was here" planted confidently next to a

piece composed of spirals and swirls that look like they're alive, swimming on the concrete, and knowing that those two pieces are saying the same thing: I'm here, I'm alive, and by virtue of being a human being, I will create. My work might not last the week, but I am satisfied knowing I've contributed to this guest book.

STELLA

When you walk past the old aqueduct, you don't think much of it. It's easy to overlook what feels like background noise, irrelevant architectural details of the city. But when you take a closer look, these spaces show themselves to be so much more. These forgotten places are often given a new life, take on new histories, and perhaps aren't so abandoned after all.

[Ending music, more uplifting and sounding like its reaching for the future]

HAILIE

Hear UR is a podcast created by students at The University of Rochester. This episode was produced by Hailie Higgins, Stella Wilkins, and Jason Lee, with engineering by Jason Lee.

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Hear UR is created using Faders, a collaborative online audio production workstation. It offers browser-based audio recording and editing, all within an easy-to-use interface - all for free! Check it out at Faders dot I O.

STELLA

We'd like to thank Will Cleveland and QuaJay Donnell for their interviews. The coordinating producer for this season of HearUR is Celia Kah-no, and the executive producers are Thomas Fleischman and Stephen Roessner. Be sure to check out other episodes of HearUR Season Four: Rochester Retold at HearUR.com.