



**LET
ME
BLOW
YOUR
MIND**

**BY
SUZANNE
WEINSTOCK**

**PHOTOS BY
WARWICK
SAINT**

Kiki de Montparnasse
black bustier dress;
Nicholas Kirkwood
heels; Loree Rodkin
ring and earrings.

There was graffiti everywhere," Eve says about growing up in the Mill Creek housing projects in West Philadelphia. "It was the thing that you tried to do. We always tried to make our names in graffiti letters." When most people hear the word *hip-hop*, the first thing they think of is music, especially rap, which Eve is obviously familiar with. But hip-hop culture also encompasses deejaying, breaking, and beatboxing, and its artistic expression is graffiti.

"This is fucking cool," she says, pulling out a camera to take a few shots of a mural by tattoo artist Mike Giant, a.k.a. Giant One, the first stop on our walking tour of street art at New York's Lower East Side. "I grew up with hip-hop, and graffiti for me, back in the day, was just spray paint," Eve says. But time spent in London while touring Europe recently piqued her interest in the art. "To them, graffiti is a picture manipulated and put on a concrete surface. It's a huge culture over there, so I wanted to see what's up in New York."

Little did Eve know, much of New York's graffiti scene traces its origins to her hometown. According to Gabriel Schoenberg, who's taking us on one of his Graffiti Tours, New York stole Philly's hand-style tags and murals in the '70s. In the 1980s, the city found its own identity with "burners"—subway cars spray painted in graffiti that helped expose the art to a wider audience, leading to a boom in the '90s and the current acceptance and acclaim that allows artists like Banksy to achieve mainstream success today.

We stop in front of Mike Giant's mural featuring a tattooed pinup girl with the word *Missbehave* arching over her head. The tattoos are hand-drawn with the artist's signature Sharpie. The mural and neighborhood trigger a

memory for Eve. "I think I got my spider down here," she says about the tattoo on her left shoulder. For Eve, usually the itch to get a tattoo comes first, then she comes up with something that means something to her and heads to the tattoo parlor. To her, spiders are delicate in size but their web-weaving makes them strong and artistic.

But the story behind her most famous tattoos lacks poetry. Eve, 18 at the time, knew she wanted paw prints. A girlfriend dared her to get them on her breasts, so she decided *What the hell?* and went for it. "My mom said it was the tackiest thing she'd ever seen," Eve says. Yet years later it was her mom who insisted she not remove them. "Hey, you don't mess with your trademark, right?"

The mural in front of us features a watercolor-like row of smiling faces, an effect achieved by mixing aerosol spray paint with water. "There are three types of graffiti writers: graffiti criminals, graffiti vandals, and graffiti artists," explains local graffiti artist Antonio "Chico" Garcia, who has been painting the neighborhood for 30 years and is helping lead our tour. "We focus on showing the art part." This particular mural is part of an outreach program that shows kids how street art can be constructive, not destructive. Eve snaps another picture. "Coming from the hood, this has given me a chance to see the world," Chico says of being commissioned to create his art in far-off lands.

"Trust me, I know," Eve replies.

She started rapping at a young age, and it kept her focused straight through high school. After graduating, she performed covers with a group called Dope Girl Posse, then started creating original music as part of the group Edjp (pronounced *Egypt*). Eventually she took the name Eve of Destruction and embarked on a solo career.



Norma Kamali bikini; Loree Rodkin ring.



Rag & Bone trench coat; The Lake & Stars slip; Nicholas Kirkwood heels; Loree Rodkin rings; Kenneth Jay Lane ring.

WINDING THROUGH THE NEIGHBORHOOD, EVE SNAPS PICTURES AT EACH STOP, asking questions until the group reaches the Houston Street graffiti wall made famous in the '80s by pop art icon Keith Haring. It's now such a prestigious place for artists to display their work that they pay for the privilege. At the moment, artist Barry McGee has it covered in the tags of well-known artists, in what he calls "the ultimate graffiti writer's roll call."

The tour leader draws our attention to the tagging people have done on top of the work. "If you put your tag over someone else's it's an insult," he explains. "It's saying my name should be on top of yours." The concept is not a foreign one to Eve, who got her start slinging insults at boys in group rap battles where she was usually the only girl. Although she became known for her fierce barbs, she slyly admits she's never actually freestyled a day in her life.

"I wish I could spit off the top of my head, but I can't. I think too much; I gotta write shit down," she says. "It was easy—I would write all my raps to sound like I was talking to one specific dude. All you have to do is go after their ego." Her ability to hold her own with the guys has served her well. She signed with Dr. Dre's Aftermath Entertainment label when she was 17 but was dropped soon after, and it was her ability to spit on the spot—freestyle or not—that helped her get her big break with Ruff Ryders. "They put on a beat and made me get up there and rap with Infrared and Drag-On. They were pretty hard-core," she remembers. After that she went through a year of "hip-hop boot camp" with the boys.

"It was a dope experience," Eve says of her time in Ruff Ryders. Her first album, *Let There Be Eve ... Ruff Ryders' First Lady* came out in 1999 and went platinum—twice. She followed it up with *Scorpion* in 2001 and *Eve-Olution* in 2002 before taking a few years to focus on her self-titled TV show. When she returned to the studio, the relationship between Eve and her label, Interscope, grew rocky. Her album *Here I Am* (later called *Flirt*) was supposed to come out in 2007. The album's first single, "Tambourine," even hit the air before the album was shelved, and, ultimately, the label released her last January. Feedback from Interscope is still on her mind and has her biting her nails about what the reaction to her new album will be.

She's ready to move on from Ruff Ryders, but are fans ready to move on with her? "When I went to take label meetings and they would listen to the music, a lot of them would be like, 'Yeah, that's good, but what's up with the Ruff Ryders shit?' I'm like, 'Yo, I was 21 then.' It's been years now. I've done a million different things. 'Tambourine' isn't Ruff Ryders. The records I did with Gwen [Stefani] weren't Ruff Ryders. I trust my audience enough to think they've grown, just like me." She pauses, then amends her statement a bit: "I'm hoping for that, but we'll see."

Eve's grown from "That Girl" to a woman. "I hate it when people say, 'The old Eve, the old Eve.' No! I can't pretend to be that girl anymore. If I did, people would see that and be like, 'Why is she trying to be that same person?' So she's leaving "the old Eve" behind and looking forward. And just a quick glance at her makes it clear that this is not the same girl who rolled with the Ruff Ryders more than a decade ago. Back then she had buzzed, bleached hair, a wardrobe not too different from the boys she rapped with, and a don't-even-think-about-messing-with-me attitude. Her nickname was "pit bull in a skirt." Today, she looks—well, see for yourself. She's more minx than pit bull. And walking around the Lower East Side in stiletto boots and skintight pants topped with a leather jacket, she learned that New Yorkers aren't shy about voicing their admiration.

Musically, she's turned a new page as well. "My deal with Interscope is completely over, thank God. ... Don't print that, though!" Eve says, before quickly changing her mind. "Actually, fuck it. I'm with EMI now. I was able to leave and

take some music with me but start over, basically." The album, now called *Lip Lock*, will be roughly half tracks she took with her and half new material. Since signing with EMI this summer, she's been busy writing and recording new music, even heading back into the studio with Swizz Beatz. Along the way she's tested out a couple of songs, like "Give It Here," with crowds in Europe.

"You're like, 'Hey, hey, hey'—the whole hook," she promises with a smirk. "Anybody can sing it. It gets the crowd up easy." There's diversity to the album as well. "Kiss Myself" is more melodic; Akon-produced "Treasure" is the album's ballad; and Eve's favorite track, "Forgive Me," has an old-school reggae vibe. The first single, "Superstar," is still under wraps, however, as Eve hopes it will blow up on first listen.

The one constant is that Eve is sticking to what she's good at, being an MC. She limits her singing to the occasional hook. "Singing is so different to me. No thank you, I don't want to play myself—unless it's karaoke, and then I belt it out," she says. The cast and crew of her eponymous TV show used to go to a hole-in-the-wall karaoke bar every Thursday. "You have to be drunk to do karaoke, though," she continues. "It's one of those things ... I need four or five before." She says she usually starts out with "Sweet Dreams" by the Eurythmics before moving on to rock songs by the Sex Pistols and anything else outside her own genre.

While she likes her karaoke eclectic, she wants her own music to work as a unit. "For me, this record tells the complete story of the night of a girl," Eve says. Her aim was to make an album a girl wants to listen to while getting ready to go out to the club. To make the assorted sounds feel cohesive, she limited herself to just a few producers instead of using a different producer for each track, like she has in the past.

Her personal life has hit a different note as well. Eve has been battered by a series of setbacks well documented in the media: the release of graphic photos of her taken during her brief stint as a stripper; a drunk driving conviction after crashing a gold Maserati; involvement with money laundering charges against her ex-boyfriend Teodorin Nguema Obiang, son of the president of Equatorial Guinea; tax evasion charges; and a sex tape release of her with ex-boyfriend and music producer Stevie J.

At one point, Eve and Stevie J had matching tattoos; his said "Sleazy" and hers said "Sleazy's Girl." Today, a peony, her favorite flower, covers hers up. But she isn't cynical about love—or declaring it through tattoos. "I'm with a new man—I would absolutely do it," she says. "I'm trying to keep this one." She's also contemplating leaving L.A., where she's always isolated in her house or car, for New York. And perhaps soon, there'll be a huge family full of kids. Until she was 12, Eve lived with a house full of extended family—mom, grandmother, brother, aunt, cousin. "I love being alone," she says. "But I also miss noises. I miss the comfort of knowing someone's downstairs, or the smells and sounds of people in the kitchen or living room."

Whatever she desires, there's no doubt she will get it. Standing in front of a work of graffiti that's viewed more often than the *Mona Lisa* thanks to a spot on a busy New York City avenue, Eve looks completely at home. Like the graffiti, her music is a product of the hip-hop culture that rose up from the street. From humble beginnings to the Ruff Ryders, her own TV show, and solo albums, she's reinvented herself many times over—she's even guest starring with a plot arc on *Glee* and plans to be involved with VH1's first-ever scripted reality show, *Single Ladies*.

With the next chapter of her music career and her life on the horizon, Eve contemplates her next tattoo. "It will probably be three little birds, which is my favorite Bob Marley song, with the words 'Every little thing gonna be all right,'" she says with a nod. "And it makes me feel that way." ■



Kiki de Montparnasse
black bustier dress;
Loree Rodkin ring
and earrings.

Stylist: Liz McClean
Hair: Erica Brown for justmycolour.com
Makeup: JJ using M.A.C Cosmetics
Manicurist: Julie Kandalec for Artists by Timothy Priano
Location: Thompson LES