



# Fab 5 Freddy, Visual Artist A Hip-Hop Pioneer

## Lesson Introduction

**Interview Log:** Interviewed on  
April 16, 2024 by Jackie Glover

- Access **The Thread** episode of Fab 5 Freddy on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- Access his long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#)

## Learning Objectives

### Social Studies Focus

- Understand the historical and cultural context that gave rise to hip-hop
- Reflect on the universal role of art, music, and film in shaping ideas and norms
- Examine the history of mass incarceration and its roots in the criminalization of cannabis
- Analyze the globalization of culture through the example of hip-hop music and culture

### English Language Arts Focus

- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one artist and entrepreneur
- Analyze the structure and purpose of a narrative, identify key themes in the episode, and synthesize information from a spoken text
- Research hip-hop music and lyrics and connect it to other forms of art and literature
- Explore how passion and purpose contribute to a meaningful life
- Analyze, reflect on, and discuss the title “A Hip Hop Pioneer” after watching the episode
- Use Fab 5 Freddy’s episode as evidence to write a rhetorical argument, commentary, or synthesis essay

## Episode Overview

One of rap and hip-hop earliest breakthrough artists, Fab 5 Freddy began dreaming of his own future as an artist at an early age. The son of an accountant and a nurse, his godfather, bebop pioneer drummer and composer Max Roach, turned young Freddy’s home into a gathering place for jazz greats like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Miles Davis. In this episode of **The Thread**, you’ll meet the multi-talented groundbreaking visual artist, filmmaker, and a man dubbed the “hip-hop architect,” the extraordinary Fab 5 Freddy.



## Biography

Fred Brathwaite, more popularly known as Fab 5 Freddy, is a visual artist, filmmaker, and hip-hop revolutionary. Born in Bedford Stuyvesant and raised by jazz aficionados, he joined the graffiti crew “The Fabulous 5” as a teenager in the 1970s. He earned his name by persistently spraying it on the number 5 train on the IRT subway. In 1979, Fab 5 Freddy gained media attention when he and graffiti artist Lee Quinones were featured in *The Village Voice*, leading to a show at Claudio Bruni’s gallery in Rome. His graffiti art soon accompanied popular artists like Futura 2000. Early in Freddy’s career, he worked as a film cameraman and appeared on Glenn O’Brien’s TV Party. He produced and starred in *Wild Style* in 1983, appeared in films like *American Gangster*, and directed music videos like Nas’s “One Love.” His recent Netflix film *Grass is Greener* explores cannabis, music, and criminal justice. In 2021, he launched the B Noble cannabis brand. Freddy’s writing has also appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*.

**Photo:** Fab 5 Freddy, 1979. (Deborah Feingold / Getty)



## Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode's opening.

### Suggested Steps

▣ **Watch and then read aloud** the opening of Fab 5 Freddy's episode with students:

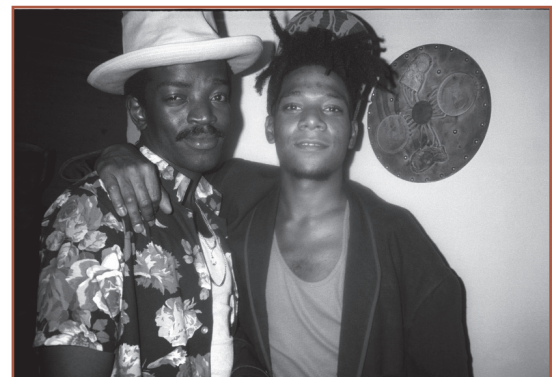
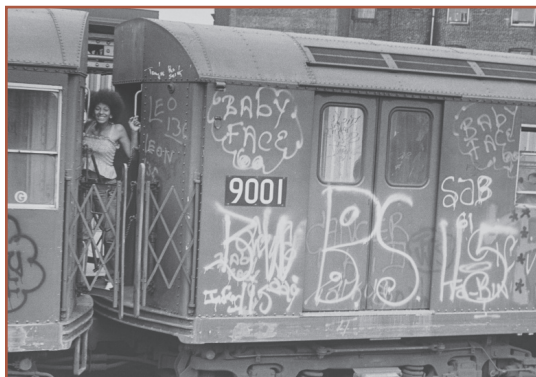
"Storytelling is everything for me. I mean, I love storytelling. My motivation for wanting to make films, to make art — I'm telling a story. There's always a story there that's so important and finding more new, innovative ways of doing that is important as well — that underlies what I do, why I do it,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



▣ **Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Fab 5 Freddy as an artist from the opening of his episode? What insights can you infer?

▣ **Next**, as a class, discuss the role of "the opening" in any form of storytelling — an interview, film, play, or song. What is their point of view on why the filmmakers chose this as the opening for the episode? What ideas, topics, or themes may the filmmakers be foreshadowing?

▣ **Last**, have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on how the opening connects with the episode's title, "A Hip-Hop Odyssey." Then, have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.



**Photos:** Fab 5 Freddy in front of his painting at the Beyond The Streets Exhibition. (Kingsley Davis / Alamy) *top*; Riding The Train: A woman smiles as she rides between two graffitied train carriages in New York City, New York, United States, circa 1970s. (Leo Vals/Archive Photos /Getty) *lower left*; Fred Brathwaite (Fab 5 Freddy) and Jean Michel Basquiat at Anita Sarko's Voodoo Party at the Palladium. Friday, June 13, 1986. (Patrick McMullan) *lower right*





## Teaching Tip:

# *The Thread Up Close*

**Step One:** Watch Fab 5 Freddy's episode "A Hip-Hop Odyssey" here.

Next, have students discuss and debrief the episode using these suggested questions:

- ▣ Fab 5 Freddy's upbringing, his circle of friends and his father's community which included amazing jazz musicians and artists, deeply influenced him as a young boy. Who are the people that deeply influenced you growing up?
- ▣ "We were making art without realizing we were making art." What does this statement from Fab 5 Freddy reveal about his artistic journey? Have you had an experience creating something that in hindsight you realized was a piece of art or something unexpected?
- ▣ How did Fab 5 Freddy's work challenge the existing narratives around hip-hop and its creators?
- ▣ *Wild Style* did not receive support from the film industry in the U.S. but in Germany and England and it became a big success. He said, "it was the first indication that this culture could translate." Do you think art and culture transcends national boundaries?

**Step Two:** After discussing the questions in Step One, have students return to *The Thread* episode and engage in a close read and analysis of her interview using the transcript and video as a reference. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning *The Thread* with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of a *Thread* lesson connection: If you are studying how movements are made or how visual art and music are windows into history and a reflection of shifts in culture, use this reflection from Fab 5 Freddy to open up the conversation:

"Part of what I was thinking about was how to make an impact, how to circumnavigate the apparent obstacles to do what I wanted to do. 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... the Sex Pistols and The Clash, and I thought this was sort of revolutionary, something really exciting going on... If I could connect with people and tell them these ideas that I was developing about graffiti as a form of 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 in the streets in these deejays. 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."





### Connections: *The Thread Up Close*

- ▣ What insights does this passage reveal about the vision of Fab 5 Freddy?
- ▣ What unique forms of expression do graffiti art and hip-hop music reflect?
- ▣ What lessons can we learn from Fab 5 Freddy's journey as an artist and cultural advocate?
- ▣ Is hip-hop, through its various forms, a vehicle for social commentary and activism? How?
- ▣ What did you learn about the interconnectedness of culture from this episode?
- ▣ How do you understand the title "A Hip-Hop Pioneer" after watching this episode?
- ▣ What new or surprising insights about hip-hop culture and music did you learn as a result of Fab 5 Freddy's career and point of view?
- ▣ What new insight did you learn about (yourself, your community, your world) from his stories?

### Activity: A Hip-Hop Pioneer

There are times in history when an artistic genre or new innovation that was not embraced at the time of its creation is eventually celebrated and recognized as groundbreaking. Often it is a result of someone taking a risk, challenging norms, following their intuition, and persisting – this is another way of describing a pioneer.

Have students identify someone they think is a cultural pioneer – they can be a hip-hop artist, a graffiti artist, or any other form of cultural expression they connect with, and have them create some type of presentation showcasing their pioneer. It can be a traditional presentation, but encourage students to think outside the box and be creative. The class can decide to host a class "festival" to share their cultural pioneer or decide for another form of sharing.

**Extended Learning:** Have students write a synthesis essay on their chosen cultural pioneer.



### Additional Resources

- ▣ Explore [Fab 5 Freddy](#) - official website
- ▣ Watch the film written by Fab 5 Freddy, [Wild Style](#)
- ▣ Read "[Living Large](#)," *The New Yorker*, June 10, 1991