



Eazy E: Aiming straight at your arteries.

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14.

The Culture Assassins

Geography, Generation and Gangsta Rap

We want "poems that kill."
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead

—Amiri Baraka

They shot bullets that brought streams of blood and death. Death. From the age of seven on, Jonathan saw George only during prison visits. He saw his brother living with the reality of death, every day, every hour, every moment.

—Angela Davis

When nineteen-year-old O'Shea Jackson returned to South Central Los Angeles in the summer of 1988, he was hopeful. All he had ever wanted to do in life was rap, and now it looked like he might be able to make something of it. Arizona had been hell-hot, dry and boring. Still, his architectural drafting degree from the Phoenix Institute of Technology might get moms and pops off his back for a few months, and within that time perhaps he could write some rhymes, make some records, cash some checks and soon move out of his folks' house.

Just two years before, he had been a junior at Taft High School, bused from his home in South Central to the suburbs of San Fernando Valley, slipping out on the weekend to grab the microphone at Eve's After Dark nightclub in Compton as the rapper named Ice Cube. He and his partners Tony "Sir Jinx" Wheatob and Darrell "K-Dee" Johnson had a group named C.I.A. (Criminals In Action). They dropped sex rhymes to shocked, delighted crowds over the hits of the day.

It was a silly act—Dolemite karaoke over UTFO beats—but it was getting attention. Eve's was owned by Alonzo Williams, and because of Alonzo, Eve's was the place to be. A smooth-talking type who had secured a contract from CBS Records for his recording project, the World Class Wreckin Cru, Lonzo used the money to build a studio in back of the club to lure producing and rapping talent.

Eric Wright was in the crowd every weekend, prowling for talent. Wright had seen the South Central hip-hop scene mature around him in the early eighties. Now the diminutive twenty-three-year-old drug dealer hoped to make some quick cash on rap, a way to go legit after years of hustling. At Eve's, Wright would catch Antoine "DJ Yella" Carraby and Andre "Dr. Dre" Young spinning records. They were members of the Cru, had a mixtape side-hustle going and were learning to make beats in Lonzo's studio. They were also two of the first DJs on KDAY's AM hip-hop radio station to join the taste-making Mixmasters Crew. New tracks that they played on the weekends often became Monday's hottest sellers.

Dre, his cousin Tony and O'Shea had been neighbors in the South Central neighborhood near Washington High School, and Dre had taken a liking to the C.I.A. boys, especially Jackson, with whom he formed a side group called Stereo Crew. He got them a gig at Skateland where he was DJing. He told them how and what to rap—filthy, dirty-down X-rated rhymes. After they stole the show and got invited back, he helped them make mixtapes to get their name out, got them a shot at Eve's, and eventually, a deal to do a single for Lonzo's Kru-Cut Records.

Dre kicked in the bass for C.I.A.'s three cuts. "My Posse" and "Ill-Legal" were Beastie Boys' bites that replaced references to White Castle with lines about cruising down Crenshaw. On the third track, "Just 4 the Cash," Cube rapped, "It's all about making those dollars and cents." Now they were indemnified to Lonzo, who gave them all tiny weekly stipends instead of royalty checks.¹

Wright had begun talking to Dre, Yella and Jackson individually. Wright told Jackson he would put them all together and form a South Central supergroup. Why not? Jackson figured. "Eazy had a partner named Ron-De-Vu, Dre was in the World Class Wreckin Cru, I was in C.I.A.," recalls Jackson. "We all kinda was committed to these groups so we figured we'd make an all-star group and just do dirty records on the side."

So one night early in 1987, Young and Wright were in Lonzo's studio with a stack of rhymes that Jackson had penned. Wright had bought some time for an East Coast duo called HBO that Dre had found. The idea was that the duo's slower New York-styled cadences and accents would be more marketable than the uptempo techno-pop rhymes that sold everywhere else—Seattle, San Francisco, Miami, Los Angeles. New York, after all, was supposed to represent the epitome of authenticity. But this notion would soon be obsolete.

Dancing to Banging

In the early 1980s, one prominent node on the Los Angeles hip-hop map was a downtown club called Radio. It was modeled on the Roxy's "Wheels of Steel" night, and presided over by local rap kingpin Ice T and jet-setting Zulu Nation DJ Afrika Islam.

New York-style b-boying went off there, but West Coast styles dominated the dancefloor. There was locking, a funk style dance started by the Watts crew, the Campbellockers, in the early '70s; popping, a surging, stuttering elaboration of The Robot, pioneered by Fresno dancer Boogaloo Sam, that would later show up in New York as the Electric Boogaloo; and strutting, a style that had come down from San Francisco's African-American and Filipino 'hoods to take hold with L.A.'s Samoan gangs.²

Radio made the Roxy's diversity look like a Benetton ad. Kid Frost and his *cholos* rolled down to the club in their low-riders, sporting their Pendletons and khakis. There were slumming Hollywood whites and South Central Korean-American one-point-fivers escaping long hours at the family business. Everyone but the hardest brothers left the menacing Blue City Strutters—a Samoan Blood set from Carson that would become the Boo-Yaa Tribe—alone.

When Radio faded, live hip-hop parties spread through the efforts of a popular sound system called Uncle Jam's Army, led by Rodger "Uncle Jam" Clayton who had begun throwing house parties in 1973 in South Central. A decade later, the Army was regularly filling the Los Angeles Convention Center and the Sports Arena. At their wild dances, the Army showed up in army fatigues and bright Egyptian costumes. They stacked thirty-two booming Cerwin-Vega speakers in the shape of pyramids.

Then shit turned real bad real quick.

Dance crews like the Carson Freakateers, Group Sex and the Hot Coochie Mamaz gave way to the Rolling 60s Crips and the Grape Street Boys. Playlists featuring frenetic sensual funk like Prince's "Head" and the Army's own "Yes Yes Yes" slowed down for a new audience that wanted Roger's "So Ruff So Tuff" and George Clinton's "Atomic Dog." The Freak was replaced by the Crip Walk. American-made .22's were replaced by Israeli-made Uzis. Chains got snatched, folks got robbed. One night a woman pulled a gun out of her purse and shot a guy in the jaw.

The New Style

Although they had come up in 111 Neighborhood Crip territory, Cube and Dre were not active gang members. Perhaps it was because Cube was being bused out of his 'hood or maybe it was because he was a jock. As far as Dre was concerned, banging didn't pay.³

But it wasn't hard for them to notice that the streets were changing. The effects of Reagan's southern hemisphere foreign policy were coming home, making millionaires of Contra entrepreneurs, illegal arms dealers, and Freeway Rick. There was a lot of firepower out there now. Since 1982, the number of gang homicides had doubled.⁴ Forget knowing the ledge. Lots of these West Coast ghetto stars had already leapt screaming over it.

Yet the music on the West Coast wasn't changing. It was still about Prince-style expensive purple leather suits and slick drum machines. The World Class Wreckin Cru was a perfect example. Dre thought Lonzo was corny, but he owed him lots of money. Lonzo not only owned the studio Dre used, he had handed out loans to Dre, sometimes bailed him out of jail for not paying his parking tickets, and even let Dre take his old car.

While Lonzo was still paying off the note, the car got stolen and ended up impounded. At the same time, Dre landed himself in jail once again, just as Lonzo was coming up short and ready to cut him off anyway. Wright saw his chance, and offered the nine hundred dollars to bail him out.⁵ But Dre had to agree to produce tracks for Wright's new record label, Ruthless.

What the hell, Dre figured. That's why he was now in Lonzo's studio on Wright's dime. He was working off the bond and the fees for getting the car back. Lonzo was out of a car and a DJ. Dre's mercenary willingness to sell his

creativity in exchange for security would prove his downfall over and again.

One of the records in heavy rotation on KDAY was by Russ Parr's local comedy rap act Bobby Jimmy and the Critters, a track called "New York Rapper" in which Parr covered Run DMC, LL Cool J, the Beastie Boys, Eric B. & Rakim, UTFO, Roxanne Shante and Kurtis Blow in a goofy country accent. "New York rappers made the street-hard sounds. L.A. rappers? Buncha plagiarizing clowns," he rapped, with emphasis on the word "clowns." By 1987, that shit wasn't so funny anymore.

L.A. rap had hit an artistic dead end; it could carry on its raunchy, cartoonish sound or imitate serious-as-cancer New York. Lonzo was milking a four-year-old cow that was going dry. Meanwhile, Dre working with HBO seemed like an admission of defeat. Cube was tired of being a follower. He had done sex rhymes, he'd done East Coast. Maybe he wanted to show these no-name New Yorkers what Los Angeles was really about. The rap he penned for them was packed with local detail, violent in the extreme.

On hearing the lyrics, HBO refused to do it, saying the track was "some West Coast shit," and walked out. Dre, Laylaw, and Wright looked at each other—now what? Dre suggested that Wright take a turn with the track. Wright was reluctant. He was supposed to be a manager, not a rapper. Dre pressed, not wanting to see a great beat and precious studio time going to waste. When Wright reluctantly agreed, Eazy E was born, and they began recording "Boyz-N-The Hood."

The record hit the streets in September of 1987, but Jackson had already left for Phoenix. The single he cut for Lonzo had not done anything. Who knew what this single would do? "The rap game wasn't looking too solid at that time, so I decided to go ahead and go to school," he says. "I went to a technical school just to make sure that I did what I wanted to do for a living, no matter what."

But now that Jackson was returning to Los Angeles, it was becoming clear that something had changed. While Jackson was working with T-squares, Wright's hustle and Dre and Yella's radio pull was getting the record off the ground. By the end of 1987, it was the most requested record on KDAY. Wright went from selling the record out of the trunk to swap meet vendors and retailers to a distribution deal with indie vanity label Macola. He had even paid Lonzo \$750 to introduce him to a white Jewish manager in the Valley, a guy named

Jerry Heller who had once promoted Creedence Clearwater Revival, Pink Floyd, Elton John and REO Speedwagon.⁶ A year after they had cut "Boyz," the single was taking hold on the streets, selling thousands of copies every week.

A Dub History of "Boyz-N-The Hood"

Jackson was proud of his rhyme. In it, Eazy cruises through town, "bored as hell" and wanting "to get ill." First he spots his car-thief friend Kilo G cruising around looking for autos to jack. Then he catches his crackhead friend JD trying to steal his car stereo. After having words, JD walks off. When Eazy follows him to make peace, JD pulls his .22 automatic. In an instant, Eazy kills him.

Like nothing has happened, he decides to see his girl for a sexual interlude. But she pisses him off, so he "reach(es) back like a pimp and slap(s) the hoe," then does the same to her angry father. Later, he witnesses Kilo G getting arrested. Kilo won't be given bail, so he sets off a prison riot.

In "Boyz-N-The Hood," girls serviced the boys, fathers were suckers and crackheads were marks. It was a seemingly irredeemable sub-Donald Goines pulp world. But then there was the unexpected finale.

Kilo makes his trial appearance and there his girlfriend, Suzy, takes up guns against the state. In the gunfight, Suzy seems bulletproof. The deputies can't stop her. Instead she goes out on her feet, not on her knees, getting sent up for a bid just like her man, barbed-wire love. By introducing this twist, a sly interpolation of Jonathan Jackson's real-life drama, "Boyz-N-The Hood" rose to the level of generational myth.

Perhaps O'Shea had heard the story as a youngster of another seventeen-year-old brother named Jackson, killed by sheriffs and prison guards in a 1970 Marin County courthouse shootout.

As Angela Davis would later remind jurors in her own trial, Jonathan Jackson lost his brother, the writer George Jackson, to the prison system at the age of seven, serving a one-to-life sentence for second-degree robbery. In early 1970, some white and black prisoners at Soledad had a minor fistfight. White prison guard O. G. Miller swiftly ended the fight by firing at three black inmates—all of whom had been known as political activists. Two died almost instantly. Guards refused to allow medical aid, and the third was left in the yard to die. Later that

winter, after an announcement that a grand jury investigation had cleared Miller, prisoners attacked another guard and threw him off a third-floor balcony. George and two others, Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette, the ones considered the political leaders of the prison, were framed for the murder. The crime could automatically bring George the death penalty.

George's letters to Jonathan, later collected in *Soledad Brother*, revealed the depth of their relationship. In the letters, he taught the younger sibling about communism, sex, resistance, being a man. But the letters remained much of what Jonathan would know of his brother, and words only hinted at the loss Jonathan was feeling. Davis wrote, "[B]ecause it had been cramped into prison visitors' cubicles, into two-page, censored letters, the whole relationship revolved around a single aim—how to get George out here, on this side of the walls." In turn, George noticed a change in his brother. In a letter to Angela Davis in May of 1970, he wrote of Jonathan, "[He] is at that dangerous age where confusion sets in and sends brothers either to the undertaker or to prison."

On August 3, in what many took to be an ominous sign, George was transferred from Soledad Prison to San Quentin Prison, in whose gas chamber he might be executed. Four days later, Jonathan strode into the Marin County Courthouse where a prisoner named John McClain was defending himself against charges he had stabbed a prison guard. Two other prisoners, Ruchell Magee and William Christmas, were also present to testify on McClain's behalf. Jackson marched into the trial chambers with an assault rifle and a cache of weapons, and sat down. When he rose, it was to calmly say, "All right, gentleman, I'm taking over now."

Jackson taped a gun to the judge's head, took several jurors and the district attorney as hostages, then walked with the three prisoners out to a van in the parking lot. Soon enough, a San Quentin guard shot at the van, and other guards and sheriffs joined in with a hail of gunfire. The bullets wounded the district attorney and a juror. The judge, Christmas, McClain and Jackson were killed.

Deputies immediately began a nationwide search for Angela Davis, who was accused of supplying Jackson with one of the guns. She was captured and sent to prison on trumped-up charges of murder, kidnapping and conspiracy. During Davis's trial, George was killed by prison guards in a deadly

prison-break attempt. Davis, Drumgo and Clutchette were later acquitted of all charges.

Jonathan Jackson's rebellion had been fearless, inarticulate and fatal. George mourned his brother by writing, "I want people to wonder at what forces created him, terrible, vindictive, cold, calm man-child, courage in one hand, machine gun in the other, scourge of the unrighteous."⁷ He considered Jonathan "a soldier of the people," an image that would find a different resonance in the Los Angeles street wars of the '80s.

Whether Cube had intended to or not, "Boyz-N-The Hood" recovered the painful memory. Tracking the lives of Compton hardrocks "knowing nothing in life but to be legit," "Boyz-N-The Hood" became an anthem for the fatherless, brotherless, state-assaulted, heavily armed West Coast urban youth, a generation of Jonathan Jacksons. The impact of "Boyz" had to do with its affirmation, its boast: "We're taking over now."

And even as these boys unloaded both barrels into their authority symbols, Eazy E revealed their vulnerability. He delivered the rap in a deadpan singsong, a voice perhaps as much a result of self-conscious nervousness as hardcore fronting. Dre mirrored Eazy's ambivalence in the jumpy robotic tics of the tiny drum machine bell. And as if to cover E's studio anxiety, Dre added a pounding set of bass drum kicks to help drive home the chorus:

Now the boys in the hood are always hard
You come talking that trash we'll pull your card
Knowing nothing in life but to be legit
Don't quote me boy, 'cause I ain't said shit

The kids knew Eazy's mask instantly. They might have quoted his lines in their own adrenalin-infused, heart-pounding defiant stances against their parents, teachers, the principal, the police, the probation officer.

So Eazy E's mask stayed. The mercenary b-boys were suddenly a group, perhaps even the "supergroup" Wright had talked about. He named it Niggaz With Attitude, a ridiculous tag that set impossibly high stakes. Now they had an image to uphold.

Los Angeles Black

Gangsta rap and postindustrial gangs did not begin in Compton, but a short distance north in Watts. Just like the Bronx gangs, they rose out of, as the ex-Crip warrior Sanyika Shakur would put it, "the ashes and ruins of the sixties."⁸

Watts was a desolate, treeless area located in a gully of sand and mud, the flood catchment for all the other neighborhoods springing up around downtown. In the 1920s Blacks had nowhere else to go.

They had been present at the very first settling of Los Angeles in the late eighteenth century, and established their first community one hundred years later. Starting at First and Los Angeles streets in downtown, they spread east and south along San Pedro and Central Avenues, where they began developing businesses.⁹

While the UNIA and the Urban League had established offices in the city by the 1920s, Los Angeles's Blacks were different—less idealistic, more pragmatic, even a little mercenary. They joined together to break into all-white neighborhoods by sending a light-skinned buyer or a sympathetic white real estate agent to make the down payment. When Blacks moved in, whites moved out. In this way, they won blocks one by one. Sociologists had a term for this process of reverse block-busting: "Negro invasion."

One Black entrepreneur had even figured out how to hustle racial fear. He told the scholar J. Max Bond:

One of my white friends would tip me off, and I would give him the money to buy a choice lot in a white community. The next day I would go out to look over my property. Whenever a white person seemed curious, I would inform him that I was planning to build soon. On the next day the whites would be after me to sell. I would buy the property sometimes for \$200 and sell it for \$800 or \$900. The white people would pay any price to keep the colored folks out of their communities.¹⁰

But during the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan burnt crosses at 109th Street and Central Avenue, and whites erected racial covenants and block restrictions that prevented blacks from moving into their neighborhoods under legal threat of eviction. Watts, literally the bottom, called "Mud Town" even by its own resi-

dents, was the only place left to go. Because so many Blacks were moving into the city, and a Black mayor was certain to be the result, Los Angeles hastened to annex Watts in the mid-1920s.

When World War II broke out, southern migrants poured into Los Angeles to fill the need for over half a million new workers in the shipyards, aircraft and rubber industries.¹¹ Now African-American neighborhoods, especially Watts—which had become the center of Black Los Angeles—were overwhelmed with demands for health care, schooling, transportation and most of all, housing. Racial discrimination kept rents artificially high, and led to overcrowding as slumlords exploited poor families, who often joined together to split a monthly bill. Historian Keith Collins writes, "Single-dwelling units suddenly became four-unit dwellings; four-unit dwellings became small apartment dwellings; garages and attics, heretofore neglected, were suddenly deemed fit for human habitation."¹²

These conditions were barely eased when racial covenants were ruled unconstitutional in 1948 and huge public housing projects—the largest of which were Nickerson Gardens, Jordan Downs, Imperial Courts and Hacienda Village—began opening in the mid-1940s.¹³ Watts soon had the highest concentration of public housing west of the Mississippi. But after the end of World War II, a deep recession set in, and much of Black Los Angeles never recovered.

To the south, Compton looked like a promised land.¹⁴ The bungalow houses were clean and pleasant; the lots had lawns and space to grow gardens. At one time, the Pacific Electric Railroad station had hung a sign: NEGROES! BE OUT OF COMPTON BY NIGHTFALL.¹⁵ But after desegregation, Blacks filled the Central Avenue corridor from downtown all the way through Compton—the area that would come to be known as South Central.

Black Los Angeles now had a rough dividing line down Vermont Street, separating the striving "Westside" from the suffering "Eastside."¹⁶ East of Watts, in towns like Southgate and Huntington Park, white gangs like the Spook Hunters enforced a border at Alameda Avenue.¹⁷ And when whites began to leave the area in the 1950s, they were replaced by an aggressive, zero-tolerance police department under the leadership of Police Chief William Parker, a John Wayne-type character that made no secret of his racism.¹⁸ Black youth clubs became protective gangs.

Los Angeles was a new kind of city, one in which most of the high-wage job growth would occur far from the inner-city outside a ring ten miles north and west of City Hall.¹⁹ When these suburban communities proliferated after the war, people of color were effectively excluded from the job and housing bonanza. Indeed, from nearly the beginning of the city's history, Blacks and other people of color in Los Angeles had been confined to living in The Bottoms—the job-scarce, mass-transit deprived, densely populated urban core.

These were the conditions that underlined the city's first race riots, 1943's Zoot Suit riots, in which white sailors, marines and soldiers brutalized Chicanos and then Blacks from Venice Beach to East Los Angeles to Watts. And these conditions had only worsened by the time a late summer heatwave hit Watts in 1965.

Remember Watts

On the night of August 11, a routine drunk driving arrest on Avalon Boulevard and 116th Street escalated into a night of rioting. White police had stopped a pair of young Black brothers, Marquette and Ronald Frye, returning from a party only a few blocks from their home for driving erratically. As a crowd formed in the summer dusk and their mother, Rena Frye, came out to scold the boys, dozens of police units rumbled onto Avalon. In an instant, the scene began to deteriorate.

Marquette, perhaps embarrassed by the appearance of his mother, began resisting the officer's attempts to handcuff him. Soon the cops were beating him with a baton. Seeing this, Frye's brother and mother tussled with other cops and were arrested as well. Another woman, a hairdresser from down the street who had come to see what was going on, was beaten and arrested after spitting on a cop's shirt. Chanting "Burn, baby, burn!" the crowd erupted.

Over the next two nights, the police lost control of the streets. They were ambushed by rock-throwing youths. They were attacked by women who seized their guns. Their helicopters came under sniper fire. Systematic looting and burning began. Among the first things to go up in smoke were the files of credit records in the department stores.²⁰ Groceries, furniture stores and gun and surplus outlets were hit next. After these places were ransacked, they were set ablaze. One expert attributed the riot's blueprint to the local gangs—the Slausons, the Gladiators and the mainly Chicano set, Watts Gang V—who had temporarily dropped their rivalries.²¹

"This situation is very much like fighting the Viet Cong," Police Chief William Parker told the press on Friday the 13th. "We haven't the slightest idea when this can be brought under control."²² Later he called the rioters "monkeys in a zoo."²³ By the evening, the LAPD and the Sheriff's Office had begun firing on looters and unarmed citizens, leaving at least six dead. Two angry whites reportedly drove into Jordan Downs and began shooting at Black residents.²⁴ Newspaper headlines read ANARCHY U.S.A.²⁵

The National Guard arrived the next day. The death toll peaked sharply in the last two days of civil unrest. Rioting lasted five days and resulted in \$40 million in damages and thirty-four dead. Until 1992, they were the worst urban riots ever recorded.

After the riots, Watts became a hotbed of political and cultural activity. Author Odie Hawkins wrote, "Watts, post outrage, was in a heavy state of fermentation. Everybody was a poet, a philosopher, an artist or simply something exotic. Even people who weren't any of those things thought they were."²⁶ It was a time of new beginnings: A week after the riots, the Nation of Islam's downtown mosque had been shot up and nearly destroyed by LAPD officers who claimed to be searching for a nonexistent cache of looted weapons. But the mosque survived and thrived. Soon the Nation would welcome Marquette Frye as its most prominent new member.

The gangs, as Mike Davis wrote, "joined the Revolution."²⁷ Maulana Ron Karenga put together the US Organization by recruiting the Gladiators and the Businessmen.²⁸ Members of the Slausons and the Orientals formed the Sons of Watts, another cultural nationalist organization. The powerful Slauson leader Apprentice "Bunchy" Carter led many more ex-Slausons and other gang members to reject Karenga and the cultural nationalists and affiliate with the revolutionary nationalist Black Panthers.²⁹

On 103rd Street, the Black Panthers set up an office next to the Watts Happening Coffee House, which housed Mafundi, a cultural performance space. In 1966, the screenwriter and poet Bud Schulberg opened the Watts Writers Workshop there. It quickly became a cultural haven for some of the most promising artistic voices in the area, including Hawkins, author Quincy Troupe, poet Kamau Daa'ood, and three young poets that would call themselves the Watts Prophets.

Anthony "Amde" Hamilton, a Watts native, was an ex-convict and an activist

when he found the Workshop through Hawkins. Soon he was working at Mafundi and serving as the Assistant Director of the Workshop. In 1969, Hawkins and Hamilton assembled a group of poets from the Workshop to record *The Black Voices: On the Streets in Watts*. In a bulldog voice—one that Eazy E would later evoke, and that would be sampled by dozens of gangsta rap producers—Hamilton growled, "The meek ain't gon' inherit shit, 'cause I'll take it!"

Through the happenings on 103rd Street, Hamilton met Richard Dedeaux, a Louisiana transplant, and Otis O'Solomon (then Otis Smith) from Alabama. They began performing poetry with a female pianist Dee Dee O'Neal, and conga accompaniment. In 1971, they recorded *Rapping Black in a White World*, a prophetic rap document. On the cover a child of the Revolution—a boy who would come of age in the eighties—wrapped himself in a soldier's oversized uniform and embraced a shotgun.

During the Watts riots, they had seen a racial apocalypse outlined in the "freedom flames" blackening the structures they did not own and could not control. Their poems were decidedly edgy, imbued with righteous rage, full of wordly pessimism. On "A Pimp," Otis O'Solomon rapped,

Growing up in world of dog eat dog I learned
the dirtiest dog got the bone
meaning not the dog with the loudest bark
but the coldest heart.

They chronicled tragic pimps, recounted drug-addled and bullet-riddled deaths, and called for the rise of ghetto warriors in the mold of Nat Turner. It was Black Art, as Baraka had called for, that drew blood. But this ferment could not last forever.

Panthers to Crips

The Prophets were close to the young Bunchy Carter. Once a feared leader of the Slausons, as well as its roughneck inner-core army, the Slauson Renegades, he met Eldridge Cleaver while doing time for armed robbery, and was now the Southern California leader of the Black Panther Party. He was formidable—an organic intellectual, community organizer, corner rapper, and "street nigga" all

at the same time—"considered," Elaine Brown wrote, "the most dangerous Black man in Los Angeles."³⁰ The Slausons had started at Fremont High in Watts, but Carter now commanded the love of Black teens of the high schools in South Central.³¹ His bodyguard was a Vietnam veteran named Elmer Pratt, whom he renamed Geronimo ji Jaga. The two were enrolled at UCLA, where they studied and planned the Revolution.

The Panthers and Karenga's US Organization were fighting for control of UCLA's Black Studies department, as FBI and LAPD provocateurs secretly and systematically raised the personal and ideological tensions between the two. On the morning of January 17, 1969, a Black Student Union meeting ended with the organizations firing on each other in Campbell Hall. Carter and Panther John Huggins were shot dead. Coming after a year of bloody confrontations with authorities across the country that had left dozens of Party leaders dead, the Panthers called Carter's and Huggins's deaths assassinations.

A year later, after the beef between the two organizations had been squashed, L.A. police arrested Pratt, the new Panther leader, on false charges, found an informant to pin a murder to him, and had him sent away for life. Even the Watts Writers Workshop was destroyed through the efforts of a FBI double agent who had been employed as the Workshop's publicist.

Filling the void of leadership was Raymond Washington, a charismatic teen at Watts's Fremont High School who had been a follower of Bunchy Carter. By the time Washington turned fifteen, the Slausons and the Panthers had both died with Bunchy. In 1969, Washington formed the Baby Avenues, carrying on the legacy of a fading local gang, the Avenues.³² Over the next two years, he walked across the eastside with a gangsta limp and an intimidating walking cane, kicked his rap to impressed youths, and built the gang.

The Baby Avenues wore black leather jackets in a display of solidarity with the Panthers' style and credo of self-defense. But somewhere along the line, the goal changed to simply beating down other Black youths for their jackets.³³ Godfather Jimel Barnes, who had joined in the early days when Washington came to the Avalon Gardens projects, says Washington had summed up his vision in this way: "Chitty chitty bang bang, nothing but a Crip thang, Eastside Cuz. This is going to be the most notorious gang in the world. It's going to go from generation to generation."³⁴

The origins of the name are now shrouded in legend. It may have been a corruption of "Cribs" or "Crypts." It may have stood for "C-RIP," all words that represented the gang's emerging "cradle to grave" gang-banging credo. Or it may have come from an Asian-American victim's description of her attacker, a "'crip' with a stick."³⁵ In any case, as O. G. Crip Danifu told L.A. gang historian Alejandro Alonso, "'Crippin'" meant robbing and stealing, and then it developed into a way of life."³⁶

For years, Mexican *pachuco* gangs had been the most organized and most feared in town. Now the Crips would transform young Black Los Angeles. Spreading through the Black corridor south to Compton and west to South Central, the Crips became, in Davis's words, "a hybrid of teen cult and proto-Mafia" and "the power source of last resort for thousands of abandoned youth."³⁷

During the Nixon years, Crip sets proliferated and gang rivalries intensified. When Washington was kicked out of Fremont and sent to Washington High on the westside, he recruited Stanley "Tookie" Williams, and Crip sets expanded into South Central Los Angeles. By 1972, where there had recently been none, there were eighteen new Black gangs.³⁸

Youths on Compton's Piru Street organized themselves into groups they called Pirus or Bloods. Other Crip rivals also emerged. In 1973, the beefs turned bloody. Through the efforts of Bobby Lavender, Sylvester "Puddin'" Scott and others, Brims, Bloods and Pirus formed a Bloods confederation.³⁹ Gang fashion had shifted from Black power dress to an appropriation of *cholo* style—Pendletons, white tees, khakis—and when Crips began flagging blue, Bloods flagged red.

Like a national map on the night of a presidential election, the Los Angeles grid was now being tallied into columns of red and blue. In the unbreachable logic of turf warfare, sets proliferated in the Black corridor, stretching through the colored suburbs west to the beach at Venice, south to Long Beach, and north to Altadena. Soon there were so many Crip sets they even went to war with each other.

"During the late seventies it slowed down," Athens Park Bloods member Cle "Bone" Sloan says, "because niggas started working in the factories. When they took the jobs away, shit started back up. Then cocaine hit the streets and niggas were in it for real."⁴⁰ As the 1980s dawned, Raymond Washington was

dead in prison, killed by a rival, and 155 gangs claimed 30,000 members across the city.⁴¹

The Bottoms

Firestone, Goodyear and General Motors closed their manufacturing plants in South Central. In all, 131 plants shuttered during the 1980s, eliminating unionized manufacturing jobs in the rubber, steel, and auto industries and leaving 124,000 people unemployed in the center city. Job growth shifted to service and information industries located beyond the rim of the ten-mile ring. Bobby Lavender saw the effects: "Thousands of parents lost their jobs. Homes and cars were repossessed. People who had just started to become middle-class were losing everything and sinking down."⁴²

In 1978, California voters, spurred by the same right-wing strategists who would soon lift Reagan from his former governorship into the presidency, passed Proposition 13, an initiative that capped property taxes and dramatically altered state and local government financing, launching a national tax revolt and permanently plunging the state into the cruelest cycle of state budget crises in the country. Passage of Proposition 13 had the kind of effect on California's cities that turning off the water might have had on its farm belt. Three decades of investment had made the state's primary and secondary education, college and university systems the envy of the nation—a model of access and quality. After Proposition 13, the state's K-12 system tumbled down all national educational indices, and as fees exploded, its colleges and universities became increasingly inaccessible to the working-class and the poor. Now that the post-war generation had gotten what it needed for itself and its children, it was pulling up the ladder.

In Los Angeles, the signs of the new mood of the state's aging white electorate read, "Armed Response." Around the downtown and at the edges of the ten-mile ring, in what Mike Davis called "post-liberal Los Angeles," security fences and security forces sprung up in commercial buildings and around gated communities. Meanwhile, Chief Darryl Gates's army locked down the interior—the vast area running south of the Santa Monica Freeway, along both sides of the Harbor Freeway and back west with the Century Freeway that had been swallowed up into the construct called "South Central," a heaving barbarian

space behind the walls, the Everywhere Else at the bottom of the ten-mile ring, viewed mainly through the nightly news or from behind the surveillance camera.

During the Reagan recession of 1983, Los Angeles's official unemployment rate hit 11 percent.⁴³ But in South Central, it was much higher, at least 50 percent for youths.⁴⁴ The median household income there was just half the state median. While white poverty rates in Los Angeles County actually declined to 7 percent, a quarter of Blacks and Latinos and 14 percent of Asians lived below the poverty line. In South Central, the rate was higher than 30 percent. Almost half of South Central's children lived below the poverty level.⁴⁵ Infant mortality in Watts was triple the rate in Santa Monica, only twenty miles away.⁴⁶ By any index, conditions had deteriorated for the generation born after the Watts Uprising.

What the South Bronx had been to the 1970s, South Central would be for the 1980s. It was the epitome of a growing number of inner-city nexuses where deindustrialization, devolution, Cold War adventurism, the drug trade, gang structures and rivalries, arms profiteering, and police brutality were combining to destabilize poor communities and alienate massive numbers of youths.

The Sound of the Batterram

Chaos was settling in for a long stay. Even an otherwise innocuous knock on one's door could bring the threat of fathomless violence. The chief symbol of the new repression was the Batterram—a V-100 armored military vehicle equipped with a massive battering ram that police used to barge into suspected crackhouses. With the drug war in full swing, the Batterram was getting a lot of action.

By the summer of 1985, nineteen-year-old rapper Toddy Tee's "Batterram" tape was the most popular cassette on the streets. Telling a story of a working-class family man whose life is interrupted by cluckheads and the Batterram, the tape was one of the first to describe the changing streets. Toddy had written and recorded the rap in his bedroom as he watched the Batterram crash through a crackhouse live on television, then duplicated the initial copies on a cheap dubbing deck, and gone out in the streets to hawk them. To his surprise, the song became a sensation, a top request on KDAY. By the end of the year, he was recutting the track in an expensive studio with a major-label budget over music

produced by big-name funk musician Leon Haywood (whose 1975 hit, "I Want a Do Something Freaky to You" would later be used on Dr. Dre's "Nuthin' But a 'G' Thing").

Toddy Tee was one of several teenagers who had hung out in the garage of a local rap legend named Mixmaster Spade. If Lonzo's empire was one center where South Central rap talent gathered, Spade's was the other major one. Spade was an older cat who had come up on '70s funk, and had developed a singing style of rap that made him a mixtape and house party legend from Watts to Long Beach. Although he never became more than a local rap hero, his style was carried on by artists like Snoop Dogg, Nate Dogg, Warren G and DJ Quik.

At Spade's house on 156th and Wilmington, right under the flight path of the two-strip Compton Airport, he held court with a kind of advanced rap school, teaching the finer points of rapping, mixing and scratching to a burgeoning crew of kids that called themselves the Compton Posse—Toddy, King Tee, Coolio, DJ Pooh, DJ Alladin, J-Ro (later of the Alkaholiks) and others. But classes ended for good one afternoon in late 1987 when L.A. county sheriffs tried to raid the house, and Spade and seven associates engaged the sheriffs in a shootout. During the fracas, one of the sheriffs plugged another in the back and sent him to King-Drew hospital. When the smoke cleared and Spade and his crew had surrendered, sheriffs confiscated \$3,000 in cash, a MAC-10 and twenty-five gallons of PCP—better known in the 'hood as "sherm" or "water."⁴⁷ The local rap school had been doubling as the neighborhood narcotics factory.

These South Central rap songs were like the new blues. But the Mississippi blues culture had developed under the conditions of back-breakingly oppressive work, the toil of building a modern nation. Hip-hop culture, whether in the South Bronx or South Central, had developed under alienated play, as solid jobs evaporated into the airy buzz and flow of a network society. As Greg Brown, a resident of Nickerson Gardens, put it, "In the sixties, General Motors in neighboring Southgate was the future. In the seventies, King Hospital was the future. Now the future in Watts and South Central is jail. You see that new Seventy-seventh Street LAPD station? It's beautiful. You see anything else in the community that looks better than that jail?"⁴⁸

Hip-hop was close to the underground economy because, more often than

not, it was being made by youths who were not exploitable, but expendable. The flatland ghettos of South Central had more in common with the distant hillside *favelas* of Rio De Janeiro, 'hoods switched off from the global network, than with the walled estates of Beverly Hills just miles away. The main difference, though, was the proximity of the L.A. 'hoods to the heart of the most advanced culture industry in the world. So from homemade cassettes, grandiose dreams were swelling.

These new blues captured the feel of the serpentine twists of daily inner-city life on the hair-trigger margin. With their urban-canyon echoing drums and casual descriptions of explosive violence, the new myths of crack, guns, and gangs sounded a lot larger than life. On *Straight Outta Compton*, they reached their apotheosis.

The Alternative to Black Power

Bryan Turner was a young white SoCal transplant from Winnipeg. In 1981, he had set out to make a living in the Los Angeles music industry, going to work at Capitol Records' Special Markets department where he put together cheap anthologies for niche markets. He left to start his own label, Priority Records, and turned a profit from novelty records like *The California Raisins*. After selling two million units of the Raisins, Turner's staff swelled to ten and was securing annual sales of \$5 million. Now he needed a real artist.

Eazy E's manager Jerry Heller had his offices in the same building. Despite the fact that "Boyz-N-The Hood" had begun moving thousands of copies, Heller was receiving rejection after rejection from major labels for Eazy's "super-group." The stuff was too violent, he was told, too street. Heller walked down to Turner's office one day and told him of his new rap project. He played Turner "Boyz-N-The Hood" and a rough demo of "Fuck Tha Police." Turner could not believe his ears, and immediately scheduled a meeting with Heller, Eric Wright and the group.

As they discussed the group and the music, Wright impressed Turner as a man with a plan. Turner says, "Almost instinctively, without a lot of experience, I wanted to be in business with these kids." He signed NWA as Priority's first act, and quickly sold over 300,000 copies of "Boyz-N-The Hood."

When Jackson returned from Phoenix, he jumped back into the fold. He,

Wright's neighbor from Compton, Lorenzo Patterson, who called himself MC Ren, and an associate of Dre and Wright, Tracy "The DOC" Curry, penned the lyrics for Eazy E's debut, *Eazy Duz It*. Their diminutive character inflated stereotypes to their breaking point—equal parts urban threat, hypersexed Black male, and class clown. The album was not half as compelling as "Boyz-N-The Hood," but when it came out in 1988, it went gold.

Then they turned their attention to the NWA album. Confident that they were on to something, they decided to go as far out as they could. Dr. Dre bragged to Brian Cross, "I wanted to make people go: 'Oh shit, I can't believe he's saying that shit.' I wanted to go all the way left. Everybody trying to do this Black power and shit, so I was like, let's give 'em an alternative. Nigger niggernigger niggernigger fuck this fuck that bitch bitch bitch bitch suck my dick, all this kind of shit, you know what I'm saying?"⁴⁹

If the thing was protest, they would toss the ideology and go straight to the riot. If the thing was sex, they would chuck the seduction and go straight to the fuck. Forget knowledge of self or empowering the race. This was about, as Eazy would put it, the strength of street knowledge.

The Aesthetics of Excess

For the album's opener, the title track, Dre looped up the drum break from D.C. funk band, the Winstons' "Amen Brother," a frenetic horn-driven instrumental funk take on the joyous hymn, "Amen," that had been revived by Curtis Mayfield and was now played with Sunday-morning abandon. The raucous and herky-jerky breakdown—which later formed the backbone for the equally frenetic drum 'n' bass sound a decade later—was the most stable element of the track.

These were not going to be the old Negro spirituals. Under Dre's hand, the "Amen" break took on a brutal, menacing efficiency. Although Dre's production was not as minimalist as Marley Marl's, it shared the desire for streamlining. He bussed up the kick drum, cued an insistent double-time hi-hat, and added a "Yeah! Huh!" affirmation and a scratched snare to propel the beat futureward. Then he inserted a sustaining horn line and a staccato guitar riff to increase the pre-millennial tension. It sounded like the drums of death.

Dre was creating a hybrid production style, adding studio player Stan "the

Guitar Man" Jones's vamps and Yella's turntable-cuts to sampled funk fragments and concrete-destroying Roland 808 bass drops. He slowed the tempo from technopop/electrodance speeds to more aggrandizing bpm's. High-pitched horn stabs lit up the tracks like rocket launchers.

Hip hop's braggadocio, too, was about to enter a new era. Jackson was exploring the contours of his new identity, Ice Cube. In "Straight Outta Compton," "Fuck Tha Police," "Gangsta Gangsta" and "I Ain't Tha 1," he portrayed himself as an untouchable rebel without a cause. Police, girls, rivals—none of them could get in Cube's game.

Reaganism had eliminated youth programs while bombarding youths with messages to desist and abstain; it was all about tough love and denial and getting used to having nothing. Even the East Coast utopians like Rakim and Chuck talked control and discipline. By contrast, excess was the essence of NWA's appeal. These poems celebrated pushers, played bitches, killed enemies, and assassinated police. Fuck delayed gratification, they said, take it all now. "Gangsta Gangsta" was the first single released from these sessions. On it, Ice Cube hollered,

And then you realize we don't care
We don't "Just say no"
We're too busy saying, "Yeah!"

Oddly enough, the album ended with a techno-pop groove produced by an uncredited Arabian Prince, "Something 2 Dance 2," more G-rated than G'ed down. It was as if the crew had hedged their bets. When the song was released as a B-side to "Gangsta Gangsta," it became a mixshow and club staple and one of the biggest urban hits of 1988 in the West and the South. In fact, "Something 2 Dance 2" pointed sideways to the dance-floor-fillers Dre and Arabian Prince were doing for pop crossover acts like J.J. Fad, Cli-N-Tel, the Sleeze Boyz, and Dre's then-girlfriend Michel'le. J.J. Fad's *Supersonic: The Album* had easily outsold *Eazy Duz It*. But all these songs were like echoes of Eve's *After Dark* or an Uncle Jam's party, relics of an age of innocence that the rest of *Straight Outta Compton* was about to slam the door on forever. Nobody would be dancing anymore.

The Return of The Local

After the album was officially released on January 25, 1989, it went gold in six weeks. It had been recorded for under \$10,000. Radio would not dare go near it, so Priority did almost nothing to promote it. The album's runaway success signaled the beginning of a sea-change in pop-culture tastes.

Because the sound was so powerful that it had to be named, someone called NWA's music "gangsta rap" after Cube's indomitable anthem, despite the fact that he would have preferred they had paid more attention to the next line of the chorus—KRS-One's pronouncement: "It's not about a salary, it's all about reality." But the moniker stuck, naming the theatrics and the threat, the liberating wordsound power and the internalized oppression, the coolest rebellion and the latest pathology, the new Black poetry and the "new punk rock."

As young populations browned, youths were increasingly uninterested in whitewashed hand-me-downs. The surprising success of Ted Demme and Fab 5 Freddy's *Yo! MTV Raps* in 1988 made African-American, Chicano and Latino urban style instantly accessible to millions of youths. With its claims to street authenticity, its teen rebellion, its extension of urban stereotype, and its individualist "get mine" credo, gangsta rap fit hand-in-glove with a multiculti youth demographic weaned on racism and Reaganism, the first generation in a half century to face downward mobility.

"That's how we sold two million," Turner says. "The white kids in the Valley picked it up and they decided they wanted to live vicariously through this music. Kids were just waiting for it." Although MTV banned the video for the title track two months after the record's release, the album became a cultural phenomenon. Fab 5 Freddy bucked upper management and brought his *Yo! MTV Raps* crew to tour with the crew through the streets of Compton.

Like a hurricane that had gathered energy over hot open waters before heading inland, *Straight Outta Compton* hit American popular culture with the same force as the Sex Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks* had in the U.K. eleven years earlier. Hip-hop critic Billy Jam says, "Like the Sex Pistols, NWA made it look easy, inspiring a Do-It-Yourself movement for anyone from the streets to crank out gangsta rap tapes." All one had to have was a pen and a pad of paper, a mic, a mixer, and a sampler. Thousands of kids labored over their raps in their dark bedrooms, then stepped onto the streets to learn first-hand the va-

garies of hustling and distribution—all just so that people could hear their stories.

NWA's *Straight Outta Compton* democratized rap and allowed the world to rush in. It was as if NWA overturned transnational pop culture like a police car, gleefully set the offending thing on fire, then popped open some forties, and danced to their own murder rap.

As capital fled deindustrialized inner cities and inner-ring suburbs for Third World countries and tax-sheltered exurban "edge cities," the idea of the Local returned with a vengeance. Big thinkers like Chuck D and Rakim had broadened hip-hop's appeal with revolutionary programs and universalist messages. But two years after Rakim's open invitation to join the hip-hop nation—"It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at"—gangsta rap revoked it.

"We're born and raised in Compton!" NWA bellowed, decentering hip-hop from New York forever. NWA dropped hip-hop like a '64 Chevy right down to street-corner level, lowered it from the mountaintop view of Public Enemy's recombinant nationalism and Rakim's streetwise spiritualism, and made hip-hop narratives specific, more coded in local symbol and slang than ever before.

After *Straight Outta Compton*, it really was all about where you were from. NWA conflated myth and place, made the narratives root themselves on the corner of every 'hood. And now every 'hood could be Compton, everyone had a story to tell. Even Bill Clinton's sepia-toned videobio, aired at the 1992 Democratic Convention, could have been titled *Straight Outta Hope*.

That a hood-centric aesthetic might rise with the Reagan right's attack on big government seemed appropriate. To combat their defense-bloated deficits, Republicans had introduced a strategy of devolution, shifting much of the burden of health, education and social services from federal government back to the states and cities. By the 1990s, under President Clinton, Democrats moved to the so-called center, joining Republicans in the slashing and burning of their own legacy.

Federal government would no longer be a place to seek remedies, as it had been during the civil rights and Black power era. Politics in the Beltway was becoming increasingly symbolic, just sound and fury. Nor could the courts, stuffed with Reagan appointees, be a source of relief. Many major political struggles had already shifted to the level of state and city governments, and were being waged amidst declining resources. States with older, less urban, more homogenous

populations and low social service needs—usually the “red-column” Republican-dominated states—made it through this transition just fine. States with younger, browning, urban populations and expanding social service needs—usually “blue-column” Democratic-dominated states—fell into a brutal cycle of crisis and cleanup, each more severe than the last.

The gangsta rappers were more right than they ever knew. Where you were from was exactly the story.

The War on Gangs

If the new national consensus around federal government was less-is-more, the new urban consensus around local government was more-is-more, particularly when it came to attacking crime and those old social pariahs, gang members. But the War on Gangs soon soured into something else entirely. And once again, Los Angeles was the bellwether.

The shot that launched the War on Gangs was not fired in Compton, East Los Angeles, or the central city neighborhoods of the Bottoms, but in Westwood Village, amidst hip clothing boutiques, theaters and eateries a short distance from UCLA's Fraternity Row.

There on January 30, 1988, in the teeming Saturday night crowd of students, wealthy westsiders, and youths who had come from throughout the city to cruise the Village, a Rolling 60s Crip named Durrell DeWitt “Baby Rock” Collins spotted an enemy from the Mansfield Hustler Crips walking up Broxton Avenue. Two young Asian Americans, Karen Toshima and her boyfriend, Eddie Poon, were out celebrating Toshima's promotion to senior art director at a local ad agency. They unwittingly walked into the crossfire. Even as Poon tried to pull Toshima to the ground, one of two bullets intended for Collins's rival struck her in the head.⁵⁰ She died at UCLA Medical Center the next day.

City Hall leaders reacted with outrage. To many Asian Americans' dismay, Toshima became a symbol of the city's racial divide. For whites, Toshima's death was a sign that gang violence was drawing uncomfortably close. To Blacks and Latinos, one death in Westwood was apparently more important to City Hall than hundreds in East and South Central Los Angeles.

Police Chief Darryl Gates had been itching for a war. Now he would get it. In weeks, City Hall leaders voted to add 650 officers to LAPD, bringing the

department to its largest size in history. LAPD held an emergency summit on gang violence and pushed for millions in emergency funds for a new military-style operation on the gangs. City Hall gave its blessing to Gates's Operation Hammer, a program of heavy-handed sweeps in Black and brown communities touted as a national model in the War on Gangs.

On August 1, in what was supposed to be Operation Hammer's crowning moment, Gates brought the War on Gangs to South Central. That evening, eighty-eight LAPD officers, supported by thundering helicopters overhead, trained their firepower on two apartment buildings at the corner of 39th Street and Dalton Avenue in South Central Los Angeles. Cops stormed through the two buildings, taking axes to furniture and walls, overturning washing machines and stoves, smashing mirrors, toilets and stereos, rounding up residents and beating dozens of them. They spray-painted LAPD RULES and ROLLIN 305 DIE on apartment walls. One resident was forced wet and naked out of the shower and forced to watch her two toddlers taken away while cops destroyed her apartment with sledgehammers.⁵¹ “We weren't just searching for drugs. We were delivering a message that there was a price to pay for selling drugs and being a gang member,” said one policeman who participated in the raid. “I looked at it as something of a Normandy Beach, a D-Day.”⁵²

Residents in the area had indeed complained to police of the drug dealing by Crips on the block. But none of those dealers lived in these two buildings. The raid yielded only trace amounts of crack and less than six ounces of marijuana. The Red Cross was forced to house nearly two dozen of the buildings' tenants, who had been effectively rendered homeless. One relief official termed it “a total disaster, a shocking disaster.”⁵³

In fact, Operation Hammer had been a massive failure from the start. In the year following Toshima's death, Gates's operation netted 25,000 arrests, mainly of youths that appeared to fit the department's gang profile. 1,500 youths could be swept up into jail in a day; 90 percent of them might be released without charge, after their information was entered into the gang database, now teeming with the names of thousands of innocents.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, hardcore bangers often tipped each other off in advance of the sweeps and escaped the LAPD dragnet.⁵⁵ The math of the Hammer did not add up. By 1992, the city was paying out \$11 million annually in brutality settlements while allocating

less than \$2 million to gang intervention programs, and almost half of all young Black males living in South Central were in the gang database.⁵⁶

Twilight Bey, a former Circle City Piru, described to hip-hop journalist and DJ David "Davey D" Cook a typically harrowing day in the life of a young male in South Central.

One of the things that would always happen is [the police] would stop you and ask you "What gang are you from?" . . . In some cases, if you had a snappy answer and by that I mean, if you were quick and to the point and had one word answers they would get up in your face and grab your collar, push you up against the police car and choke you. Or they would call us over and tell us to put our hands up and place them on the hood of the police car. Now usually the car had been running all day, which meant that the engine was hot. So the car is burning our hands which meant that we would have to remove our hands from the car. When that happened, the police would accuse of us of not cooperating. Next thing you know you would get pushed in the back or knocked over . . .

You have to remember most of us at that time were between the ages of twelve and sixteen. Just a year ago we were ten and eleven and playing in the sheriff's basketball league where they would treat us like little kids. A year later when we are close to being teenagers we are suddenly being treated with all this abuse.

In a lot of cases you had kids who had chosen never to be a gang member. . . . If you told them you weren't in a gang, they would look at whatever graffiti was written on the wall and put you on record as being part of that gang.

DAVEY D: . . . It seems like it was some sort of sick rites of passage so that by the time you became a grown man you knew to never cross that line with the police.

TWILIGHT: Yes, that's exactly what it was. It was some sort of social conditioning. Instilling fear is the strongest motivation that this world has to use. It's also the most negative. . . . What I mean by that is, if you are constantly being pushed into a corner where you are afraid, you're going to get to a point where you one day won't be. Eventually one day you will

fight back. Eventually one day you will push back. When you push back what is going to be the end result? How far will this go?

The Backlash

By June 1989, a right-wing backlash against NWA was in full effect. That month, the newsletter *Focus On the Family Citizen* bore the headline *RAP GROUP NWA SAYS "KILL POLICE."* Police departments across the South and Midwest faxed each other the song's lyrics. Tour dates were abruptly cancelled. Cops refused to provide security for NWA shows in Toledo and Milwaukee. In Cincinnati, federal agents subjected the crew to drug searches, asking if they were L.A. gang members using their tour as a front to expand their crack-selling operations. Nothing was ever found.⁵⁷

In August, FBI assistant director Milt Ahlerich fired off a letter bluntly warning Priority Records on "Fuck Tha Police." It read:

A song recorded by the rap group N.W.A. on their album entitled *Straight Outta Compton* encourages violence against and disrespect for the law enforcement officer and has been brought to my attention. I understand your company recorded and distributed this album and I am writing to share my thoughts and concerns with you.

Advocating violence and assault is wrong, and we in the law enforcement community take exception to such action. Violent crime, a major problem in our country, reached an unprecedented high in 1988. Seventy-eight law enforcement officers were feloniously slain in the line of duty during 1988, four more than in 1987. Law enforcement officers dedicate their lives to the protection of our citizens, and recordings such as the one from N.W.A. are both discouraging and degrading to these brave, dedicated officers.

Music plays a significant role in society, and I wanted you to be aware of the FBI's position relative to this song and its message. I believe my views reflect the opinion of the entire law enforcement community.⁵⁸

The letter came as NWA was touring, and had the effect of further mobilizing police along the tour route. NWA's tour promoters tried to secure an agreement

from the band not to perform the song. The national 200,000-member Fraternal Order of Police voted to boycott groups that advocated assaults on officers of the law. But in Detroit, where local police showed in intimidatingly large numbers, the crowd chanted "Fuck the police" all night, and the crew decided to try anyway. As Cube began the song, the cops rushed the stage. The group fled.

Music critic David Marsh and publicist Phyllis Pollack broke the Ahlerich story in a cover article in *The Village Voice*, and through their organization Music In Action, mobilized the ACLU and industry leaders to formally protest. Turner forwarded the letter to sympathetic congresspersons and the FBI backed off.

Choosing Sides

But NWA's scattershot test of the limits of free speech provoked outrage even in sympathetic quarters.

"I thought NWA was Satan's spawn. I was like, fuck these Negroes for real," says hip-hop journalist Sheena Lester, then the youth and culture editor for the Black-owned, South Central-based *Los Angeles Sentinel*, later an editor at *Rap Pages and Vibe*. "I was reading about them—who are these motherfuckers? What do you mean, 'bitch' this and 'ho' that? Fuck them. If I'm a bitch, kiss my ass. I just felt like dealing with NWA was counterproductive."

She was not alone. The political and cultural rads had become hip-hop progressives, deeply influenced by their elders' Third World liberation politics but drawn to the rapidly transforming landscape of pop culture's present. The media dam holding back representations of youths of color was near to bursting, and hip-hop gave them confidence the flood would soon come. They took over college and community radio stations, started up magazines, cafes and clubs, and created art, design and poetry with the same kind of energy they took to storming administration buildings.

NWA presented them with a thorny dilemma. There was the I-am-somebody rap rewrite of Charles Wright's Watts 103rd Street Band's "Express Yourself" and the lumpenprole rebellion of "Fuck Tha Police." But they certainly couldn't ignore the allure of lines like, "To a kid looking up to me, life ain't nothing but bitches and money," not least when the rhyme was being delivered boldly over thrilling beats that made a heart race.

The first boycotts against NWA came from community radio DJs and hip-hop

writers, who were publicly outraged at the crew's belligerent ignorance, and privately ambivalent about the music's visceral heart-pounding power. Bay Area hip-hop DJs Davey D and Kevin "Kevvy Kev" Montague led a boycott of NWA and Eazy E on their nationally influential college radio shows, believing it would be contradictory to play such music while they were trying to create an Afrocentric space on the air. Both devoted hours of call-in radio to the debate, and their listeners finally supported the ban. The boycott spread to other hip-hop shows across the nation.

To the hip-hop progressives, the true believers who embraced rap as the voice of their generation, NWA sounded militantly incoherent. Their music drew new lines over issues of misogyny, homophobia, and violence. NWA had stepped up rap's dialogics; reaction was the point. They anticipated the criticisms, but silenced them by shouting them down. Defiant and confident, Yella even disclosed the in-joke, scratching in a female voice, "Hoping all you sophisticated motherfuckers hear what I have to say."

The hip-hop progressives were hearing it and were conflicted. Three decades after Baraka's call for "poems that kill," radical chic had become gangsta chic. Just as the blues had for a generation of white baby boomers, these tall tales populated with drunken, high, rowdy, irresponsible, criminal, murderous niggas with attitude seemed to be just what the masses of their generation wanted. Even more disconcerting, they lined up all the right enemies: the Christian right, the FBI, baby boomer demagogues. NWA was going to force every hip-hop progressive to confront her or his relationship to the music and choose sides.

When *Straight Outta Compton* crossed over to white audiences, things became very unpleasant. Gangsta rap was proving more than just "the new punk rock"; it became a more formidable lightning rod for the suppression of youth culture than white rock music ever had been. Yet the music was undoubtedly difficult to defend. To the hip-hop progressives, it sometimes seemed less than a cultural effect of material realities, a catalyst for progressive discussion, or objective street reportage of social despair, than the start of further reversal. Yet the music was undoubtedly difficult to defend. It sometimes seemed less than a cultural effect of material realities, a catalyst for progressive discussion, or objective street reportage of social despair, than the start of further reversal.

In the photo for a 1990 *Source* cover story, Eazy E aimed his 9mm at the

reader, over the cover line, THE GANGSTA RAPPER: VIOLENT HERO OR NEGATIVE ROLE MODEL? Inside, a fierce debate raged over gangsta rap. David Mills asked, "[Y]ou wonder whether things have gotten out of control, and whether, like radiation exposure, it'll be years before we can really know the consequences of our nasty little entertainments."⁵⁹

Worse yet, the culture wars seemed to stoke the political wars—the War on Gangs, the War on Drugs, the War on Youth. As Rob Marriott, James Bernard and Allen Gordon would write in *The Source*, "The saddest thing is that these attacks on rap have helped set the stage for the most oppressive and wrong-headed crime legislation. Three strikes out? Mandatory sentences? More cops? More prisons? Utter bullshit."⁶⁰

But the hip-hop progressives had always argued that the media needed to be opened to unheard voices. By calling themselves journalists, Ice Cube and NWA outmaneuvered the hip-hop progressives, positioning themselves between the mainstream and those voices. No one else, they claimed, was speaking for the brother on the corner but them—loudly, defiantly and unapologetically. So *Straight Outta Compton* also marked the beginning of hip-hop's obsession with "The Real." From now on, rappers had to represent—to scream for the unheard and otherwise speak the unspeakable. Life on the hair-trigger margin—with all of its unpredictability, contradiction, instability, menace, tragedy and irony, with its daily death and resistance—needed to be described in its passionate complexity, painted in bold strokes, framed in wide angles, targeted with laser precision. A generation needed to assassinate its demons.

Many young hip-hop progressives would thus come to have their "NWA moment," that moment of surprise and surrender when outrage turned to empathy, rejection became recognition and intolerance gave way to embrace. "I was going to a club called 'Funky Reggae,' and I remember being in the middle of the dance floor, hearing 'Dopeman' for the first time and stopping," says Lester. "And going over to the side of the dance floor and just concentrating on what they were saying—which was tough to do because the beat was so bananas. The lyrics just struck me so tough I had to step to the side and really concentrate on what they were talking about. And that's when I fell in love with NWA. There's been moments in my life when I've thought certain things or put up with certain things and felt a certain way about things and then, with the snap of a finger, clarity came. And this was one of those moments."

Suddenly the ghosts of 1965 seemed not only prescient, but present. They were gazing over Ice Cube's shoulder. They were pushing hip-hop progressives to give up the certainty of the past, to embrace their generation and its future, even if that meant coming closer to apocalypse and decay. A millennial impulse was brewing.

Richard Dedeaux's words from Watts seemed prophetic:

Ever since they passed them civil rights
Those fires have been lighting up the nights
And they say they ain't gon' stop til we all have equal rights
Looks to me like dem niggas ain't playing.