Rapture in Reagan’s America

The room was hot, sweaty, highly charged and had the feel of destiny to it.

—Chi Chi Valenti

You just had the sense of the future, like you could do anything you wanted to.

—Rasta “Kool Lady” Blue

It was morning in Ronald Reagan’s bright white America. Elected by a landslide in 1980, he rode into office like a collodion cavalry colonel coming to the rescue of the beleaguered frontiersmen. When Reagan’s campaign trail took him through the dead land of Fort Apache to Charlotte Street, it followed almost exactly the same route that Jimmy Carter had taken in 1977. There, Carter had given his soundbite: “I’m impressed by the spirit of hope and determination by the people to save what they have.” Three years later, on the same empty block, the only things new were John Fekner’s graffiti stencils on the blasted brick walls, which read: TACAS PROMISES AND BROKEN PROMISES. Reagan stopped in front of one of these stencilled walls, to the eternal grief of his handlers and positioners, and told the media: “I’m impressed with the spirit of hope and determination by the people to save what they have.” The presidential campaign had become a nitrate film, looping in advanced decomposition.

In downtown’s tiny art-crammed sweatboxes, whites were watching young brown and black b-boys go off to throbbing Afrocotized versions of soundtrack music from the spaghetti westerns often played by mixed-race bands like...
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the Incredible Bongo Band's "Apache" and Babe Ruth's "The Mexican," dramatic rewrites of Ennio Morricone themes that the b-boys favored for their head-bursting percussion, thundering basslines and Morricone's cascading, whooping melodies. In particular, "The Mexican," sung by Jenny Han, captured the fall of the Alamo through the eyes of a Mexican bandito caught on the American side when the fighting commenced. It climaxed with a final battle cry: "Morning, sad morning, heaven will be there!"

Downtown Utopia

The nightclub had become a communal sacred space, a chance to escape the choking oppression of time, to vault the restrictions of the social order, a place to watch the rules become liquid, and peer into possibility.

In the body heat and thumping beats, Ruza Blue, a true believer in the power of clubbing, was seeking a sensual utopia and a democratic alternative. "It was the Reagan era and there was talk of war and nuclear weapons," she says. "But then there was this whole thing going on in New York where it was the youth culture getting together in unity and peace and having fun. No segregation and everyone joining together. Just the opposite of what was going on politically."

And Crazy Legs, a true believer in the power of hip-hop, saw what many others saw—a bit of magic happening. "It was the beginning of the breakdown of racial barriers," he says. "'82 was the beginning of worldwide understanding. But there would be a price to pay, too. They were promised heavens—false heavens and heavens which never materialized. The nights of radiant children always come to an end.

When spring bloomed in 1981, the giddy affair between uptown and downtown toppled the charts. Deborah Harry—who, by the number of canvases dedicated to her, seemed to be the object of every graffiti artist’s desire—was sweetly sighing out of every radio in the country: "Well to wall, people hypnotized, and they're stepping lightly, hang each night in rapture." Then she turned sulky, and rapped: "FAB 5 FREDDY told me everybody's fly, DJ's spinning I said, 'My, my!' Flash is fast, Flash is cool. Francoise c'est pas facile non deu." Not that anyone outside of New York—at least of all Paris—knew what she was talking about. Not yet.

The rapture was still mainly in the minds of the believers, a small tribe moving to the edge of reshaping pop culture. Ruza Blue, a recent immigrant from London, was one of the believers. By day, she ran World’s End, Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren’s Soho boutique. In London, she had been a regular at a landmark new wave club run by Steve Strange called The Blitz. She recalls, "I used to go down there every Tuesday night to the club, sometimes not even getting in because sometimes Steve wouldn’t let you in. I used to stand outside, ‘Please let me in! And I thought one day, I’m gonna do a club like this. I don’t know what I’m going to put inside it, but I’m gonna do something like that.” After she saw Bombastas and the Rock Steady Crew open for Bow Wow Wow at the Ritz, she knew she had found religion. She began frequenting the Disco Fever with FAB 5 FREDDY, who dubbed her "Kool Lady Blue."

By November, Blue started hosting her own Thursday night "Wheels of Steel" parties at a tiny basement reggae club—capacity: 200—called Negril. Once frequented by Bob Marley, Negril had become the after-hours hangout for the Clash and other Brit punk expats. With Michael Holman, she brought in what seemed to have become the party-starting bill of the year: Bombastas and the Zulu Nation DJs, FAB 5 FREDDY, RAMMELZEE and the Rock Steady Crew. Then she promoted it to her punk peers, "People heard, 'Oh wow, the Clash are hanging out here.' When they arrived, they encountered iconic Bronx b-boys hanging outside in kangols, ski goggles, and bubble jackets, and inside, a racially mixed crowd who had cleared a circle for the Rock Steady Crew and were moving to the sounds of Bombastas, Jazzy Jay and Afrika Islam on the turntables and FAB 5 FREDDY on the microphone.

Blue’s "Wheels of Steel" night at Negril was the next logical step from FAB’s "Beyond Words" show at the Mudd Club, Henry Chalfant’s abortive Common Ground show, and the revived "Graffiti Rock" shows with FAB and The Rock Steady Crew and a host of graf artists at the Kitchen. Jazzy Jay says, "First couple times we played at Negril, it was an sight crowd, not too many people was in there. By the time a couple of weeks went by, man, it was standing room only!" The tiny club hummed with sensory overload. Jorge "Papamaster Fabel" Fabon, who was initiated into Rock Steady on the Negril dance floor, recalls, "Here we are looking at punk rockers and different types of bugged out people, you know, those Village type people. It was a whole new experience."
Negril had been a space for punks and Rastas and like-minded scoundrels to meet on equal terms. Now, Blue handed the club over to the Bronx and uptown crew, and the exclusive crowd soaked up the vibe. Jazzy Jay says, "We'd school from the DJ booth, you know what I'm saying? That's what we was doing downtown. We was schooling them on our artform. Bambotaa would put these breaks on and drive them wild and then I'd get on the turntables and start cutting shit up and they'd be losing their minds. MCs get on, that was it. B-boys take the floor, it was like, you!"

Jazzy Jay recalls, "We fed off of the crowd a lot to get them hyped was half of the reason we did it. Well, at least a quarter. Three-fourths were for more selfish reasons," he chuckles. "Like, there's some fine girls around here, you!"

Jazzy Jay couldn't believe his luck either. "I'm a carpenter by trade," he says. "I'm making as much from this as I'm making from my union gig. You know what? The union gig can wait. My hobby is doing me alright." After four dazzling months, the crowds were bursting the club's walls. Fire department officials stepped in to shut Negril down. No matter. Negril would turn out to be merely a prelude.

By then, everyone was humming another downtown hit Tom Tom Club, a lighthearted spinoff group of the heralded postpunk band Talking Heads, caught ears with "Genius of Love"—a glibish ode to the deepest, coolest guy in town that slipped, somehow appropriately, into a celebration of the Black rhythms of George Clinton, Bootsy Collins, Boohannon, Bob Marley and Sly and Robbie. The song captured the peculiarly downtown ecstasy: "There's no beginning and there is no end. Time isn't present in that dimension." By the last verse, however, it was clear that the affair—sweet as it was—was doomed.

**Be What You Be**

In April of 1982, Afrika Bambotaa unleashed a grand statement for what he was now calling the hip-hop movement. It was called "Planetary Rock." Bambotaa was the right man to do it. He walked through downtown the way he did in the Bronx, the warrior-king of a massive, expanding tribe. He showed a mahawk into his head—a salute, it seemed, not only to the rebels of Kings Road and the Bowery but a young, shocking Sonny Rollins. His crew dressed like a wild cross between a band of New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians and interstellar Afrofuturist prophets. Downtowners were impressed. "This guy carries weight," Gary Jarmon wrote in *The Village Voice*, "like the music stars in the '60s did."

After cutting two singles with Paul Winley—different versions of "Zulu Nation Throwdown!" (Bambotaa says "Death Mix" was unauthorized)—and being disappointed with the results, Bambotaa met Tom Silverman, a white music journalist who had started a record label for twelve-inch dance singles. "Bambotaa was very, very different than anybody else was from the Bronx. He said, 'I don't want to be a star because stars fall,' " Silverman recalls. "When you're in the presence of a person like that you just feel a different kind of energy. I've seen this guy when he was Djing and a light would break out. He'd stop the music and then he'd play like four bars of James Brown and stop the music again. And he goes, 'You like that Stop Fighting.' And everyone would stop fighting and he'd turn on the music again." Silverman knew he had to do business with this guy.

While publishing a popular tipsheet called Dance Music Report, Silverman had first heard about hip-hop music from a friend at Downtown Records. "I knew the store because I used to buy doo-wop music there. They'd opened a new room and it was called the 'Brooklyn Room' and it was like a closet the size of a small office. It had a high desk in the front and in the back they had the records. It was the specialty room where you have kids come in and buy these breakbeat records. They were buying things like cutout records that were like a dollar each but they were being sold for ten dollars. Albums like The Eagles' The Long Run and Billy Joel's "Big Shot," all these weird records. Bob James, "Apache," "Dance to the Drummer's Beat"—a lot of them on 45s, a few old albums and a lot of people would buy them just for one break and the break would only be for seven seconds long or three seconds long so they have to buy two of them so they could mix it. The kids were fifteen and sixteen. They'd chip in money, then three or four of them would come in and buy records together. I asked them how they find out about which records had the breaks, where they find out about the breaks, and they say there's this guy in the Bronx called Afrika Bambotaa and he had this thing called the Zulu Nation. So I went up to check it out."

Bambotaa was spinning at the T-Connection at a Zulu Nation anniversary
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party. Red Alert and Jazzy Jay were standing sentry, handing his records, "It was the weirdest mix of music I ever heard in my life but it was amazing," says Silverman. After returning to Bambataa's parties a few more times, Silverman asked him if he'd like to make records. They talked for a minute, then before Silverman left Bambataa handed him a business card that read, "Afrika Bambataa Master of Records." Under Silverman's label, Tommy Boy, Bambataa released "Jazzy Sensation" in November 1981.

Silverman had brought in a young dance producer named Arthur Baker to oversee "Jazzy Sensation." Baker had begun to learn how to use drum machines, synthesizers and early sampling technology. The record was a success, and the three wanted more.

By then Bambataa had realized, "I could use my albums to send messages. And the record companies played their role of sending these messages to all these places." He told Silverman he had an idea for a song. He and Jazzy Jay had already drawn up a rough blueprint of the music, based on some of his favorite records: BoBe Ruth's "The Mexican," Captain Sky's "Super Sperm," Kraftwerk's "Numbers" and "Trans-Europe Express," B.T. Express "Do You Like It" and Rick James' "Give It to Me." Together, he and Silverman put together a rough eight-track demo on synthesizers. In the meantime, Bam went to his rapper MC GLOBE and gave him the concept to begin laying out the rap.

Bambataa had hooked up with gueardhead and keyboardist virtuoso John Robie, who had a dance single that Bam was playing. Silverman, seeing the obvious, blessed the project and sent the Bam, Baker and Robie to Vanguard Studios in the Village to assemble the record. The final version included only Kraftwerk and Babe Ruth.

This stripped-down result somehow perfectly captured Bambataa's mystery. "Planet Rock"'s polyglot pastiche, framed by swooping, synthesized orchestral stabs, suffused the listener into another world—where dramatic melodies drifted across a barren landscape, "where the nights are hot, where nature's children dance inside a trance," where everyone could rock it, don't stop it. Not only did it sound unlike anything that had ever come out of the Bronx, it sounded unlike anything else anywhere. "Planet Rock" was hip-hop's universal invitation, a hypnotic vision of one world under a groove, beyond race, poverty, sociology and geography. The Soulstonic Force shouted, "No work or play, our world is free. Be what you be, just be!"

Bambataa says, "I really made it for the Blacks, Latinos and the punk rockers, but I didn't know the next day that everybody was all into it and dancing. I said, 'What? This is interesting.'" Silverman says that the record cost eight hundred dollars to make. It went on to sell 650,000 copies. But its importance would be felt far beyond the number of copies it sold.

"Planet Rock" had far more impact than any record I've ever been involved in," Silverman says. "The only record I can think of in the hip-hop movement that maybe had more of an impact was 'Rapper's Delight' because that's the first one that opened the door. But 'Planet Rock' took it in a whole 'other way. That was the record that initiated that it wasn't just an urban thing, it was inclusive. It was okay for rockers, new wavers, uptown coming downtown. That's when they started pouring in from France and England to cover hip-hop. That's when hip-hop became global."

Street Culture's at the Roxy

When Kool Lady Blue finally found a new home for her "Wheels of Steel" night, her club became the scene of a model that countered the elitism of the Blitz. To its ecstatic followers, the Roxy would become "a club that changed the world."

After getting kicked out of Negril, Blue had done a couple of "Wheels of Steel" nights at Danceteria, another downtown new wave club. But convinced that she was on to something big and significant, she fell in love with a huge, nearly block-long roller rink in Chelsea on West 16th Street and Tenth Avenue. The Roxy's capacity was twenty times that of Negril. "I said the Roxy is mega-big, I can't see you packing that joint," says FAB 5 FREDDY. "She said, 'Well I think we have an idea, we can bring this curtain and cut off more than half of the club.' So she took me to show it to me and I gave her my thumbs up on some shit like that. Then from there it was like, boom!"

In June, Blue hung out a sign at the rink: COME IN PEACE THROUGH MUSIC. Her gamble was immaculately timed. She opened the club with all of the scene's leading lights at the beginning of a hot summer when griffites and disco-and hip-hop music was on everyone's minds.

For the first few nights, a curtain painted by FUTURA was set in the middle of the floor. Each week, the crowd grew and the curtain moved back toward the wall, until it was literally against the wall. Long lines snaked down West 16th to-
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The Hudson. After clearing the bouncers, clubbers stepped up into a long hallway that featured neon-colored graffiti murals and felt the sticky beats set their \n
hearts to racing. They were stepping into another world.

"The regals were Bham and Afrika Islam, and then Grandmaster DST, Jazzy

Jay, Grand Wizard Theodore, Grandmaster Flash, and I'd rotate them," she

says. "We had no booth, The DJ would be at the center of the floor on a podium.

Everyone could see what he was doing, and he was kind of elevated to rock

star status." On both sides of the DJ, large projection screens displayed Charlie

Ahearn's slides of Bronx b-boys, rappers, and scene-makers. Nearby, the Rock

Steady Crew convened all-night cyphers on the beautiful blonde wood floors.

PHASE 2 designed the club's flyers and he, FUTURE, DOZE, and others often

did graffiti pieces live on stage. Here were the four elements, re-presented
downtown as performance art on an epic and mystic scale.

FAB 5 FREDDY recalls the turning point as the July night Blue decided to

book a screening of Mclaren's Sex Pistols movie, The Great Rock 'N Roll Swin-
dle before the regular opening of the club. "The crowd initially was mostly

heads from the scene. The night it all really mixed I remember vividly," he

says. "[The film] attracted all of these cool punks, white new wave heads, what-

ever. The film was shown kinda early like around nine. When it was over, a lot

of that crowd stayed. And then the crowd for the hip-hop night started to come

and I was wondering like, 'Yo what's gonna happen?' And everybody kinda

bogged out looking at each other. You had these ill b-boys with the poses and

shit, checking out these kids with the crazy haircuts and that whole vibe. And

everybody kinda got into each other, so to speak. That's when it really kinda

took off as the first really major downtown club that had like a legitimately

mixed scene."

The East Village elite came out—rall the Mudd Club regulars, the Co-Lab ac-

tivists, bands like the Talking Heads and the Boys, the come-ups known by a sin-

gular name: Basquiat, Haring, Madonna, Blue, and the anti-Studio 54.

But the stars came anyway, blown in by the winds of change, the promise of

something inevitably new and vibrant. David Bowie and Andy Warhol de-

scended from the VIP booth to the join the masses on the dancefloor.

The scene also felt inviting for mainstream whites, like David Herschkowitz, a

music journalist who would go on to publish PAPER magazine. "It was cool, it

wasn't rowdy. And I don't remember it smelling dangerous or anything like that,

the way those things eventually turned into," he says. "What attracted me to it at

first was it was a hip-hop thing coming downtown from the Bronx into my neigh-

borhood and mingling with the artists and the writers and the people who were

in Manhattan who didn't have any direct contact with hip-hop at the time. The

doors were open.

"The crowds were very diverse. That was why I was so excited to be there.

Suddenly this racially mixed group was having a good time partying in a room

together, which was a very rare thing. On the level of music and art, people

were able to bridge all those boundaries."

He adds, "The other thing that reminds me of those days is the style, because

we were coming out of a sloppy area. Punk rock was about wearing torn clothes,

T-shirts and just messy. Here you got these guys who would wear their jeans,

but they'd be creased and they'd be perfect. And they'd have their sneakers but

they'd be completely white. I remember one time I went into the bathroom and

I said, 'What are you doing?' And it was FAB 5 FREDDY and another guy with

toothbrushes cleaning their shoes. Here were these guys from the ghettos com-

ing out and showing everyone how to dress, how to be fresh, how to be clean,

how to have it together—whether it was the way you do your dance or your gra-

ffiti or your rapping or your DJing, it was all style."

Among the masses on the floor were a new generation of white kids, watch-

ing the future rush right up to their shellshells. Dante Ross, who would become a

key hip-hop A & R exec during the late '80s, remembers, "I used to go to the

Roxy, me and my neighbor Adrock. Me and the Beastie Boys and the girls from

Luscious Jackson, we were like the handful of people who got to experience shit

while it was still open and ill, before New York was corny and everything was

kind of co-opted. The word 'alternative' didn't exist. It was this great moment,

man, the 'Graffiti Rock' moment. Everything was all mixed up, it was cool to be

eclectic. The music was uptempo, bright—Malcolm McLaren's 'Buffalo Gals,"

Chuck Brown's 'Bustin' Loose,' Monie DiaBango's 'Soul Makossa,' the Rolling

Stone's 'Start Me Up,' Ahearn's 'Release Yourself,' new rap records by FAB

5 FREDDY and PHASE 2—a perfect showcase for the Rock Steady.

Crazy Legs, all of sixteen, was amazed at how far he and his crew had come in

three short years. "We were the stars," he says. "When we had started per-
forming, we were the people that were at the jams in the Bronx outside the ropes. Now we had become the people that were inside the ropes. Now we had the opportunity to perform with Cold Crush Brothers, Fantastic Five, Grandmaster Flash, Grandmaster Funky Four + One, we became part of that elite clique in hip-hop. We thought about that a lot. We were just appreciating the fact that we were at a place where we could be recognized for our skills by all these people we wanted to be.

“We were just innocently having fun,” he says, “not realizing that we were setting a foundation for what is a multimillion dollar a year industry.”

Charlie Ahearn recalls, “You would go to a night at the Roxy and there would be eight b-boyng circles. Girls would be getting laid in the back room by fourteen-year-old graffiti artists that couldn’t wait to do some blonde. It was all good. A lot of excitement, a lot of energy.”

“Ah man, the Roxy,” sighs DOZE. “Home! That’s when the money was rolling and cocaine was flowing!

“I call them Dusiland Memories. Fuck Stardust memories, it’s Dusiland memories” he laughs. “Just everyone being on bongos, walking around with cocaine wrapped up in newspaper, and just being in the VIP room with Madonna and Shannon and fucking Jody Watley and fucking Shalomar and all them heads. It was just funny.” He shakes his head at his teen mischief, halfway between pride and sadness.

“You go from the real new wave to the hardcore punk to the b-boy to the stick-up kid b-boy to the Date Webo fashion boy to the Funkhouse Jellybelly Benitez look to the Madonna lace-fairy to the wannabe artist nouveau bohemian. It was just an eclectic bunch. But it was cool ‘cause everybody got along and you got to meet some real cool chicks. Kinds weird chicks, too. Weird weird weird weird!”

Then he becomes animated. “Crazy she went on in that place. My mom even went! Ken Swift’s mom used to go. Crazy Legz’s mom used to go. Yeah! We’d be embarrassed. Like—‘Ah Ma! Get outta here, come on!’ ‘I’m so proud of you, come here’! ‘We’d be like, ‘Fuuuck, get outta here!’ So we’d hide ‘til they leave, ’cause parents have to go home early.” He’s laughing hard now. “They’d leave, then we’d be like, ‘Yeah! Allright, Wassup baby!’” he laughs, making a highfive, then bending his head as if over a mirror laced with white lines.

“Sammocoocooont Ahhh, Allright!”

Chi Chi Valenti, a downtown personality and sometime host at the Roxy, wrote, “By late 1982, Fridays had become a required stop for visiting journalists and Eurotrash—to be in New York and miss the Roxy was unthinkable. More than anything the Roxy embodied a certain vision of what New York could be— a multifaceted center of world culture, running on a current of flaming, uncompromised youth.”

Blue tried to match all the artistic ambition with a booking policy that was just as eclectic and innovative. She brought an uptown who’s-who to the downtown stage: Double Trouble, the Treacherous Three, the Fearless Four, the Disco Four, The Crash Crew, The Sequence, Masterdon and the Def Committee DJs. In the earliest stages of their careers, New Edition, Madonna and Run DMC stepped onto the Roxy stage. She brought in the Double Dutch girls, and featured a Harlem youth dance troupe and a Brazilian Capoeira crew. She even hired Native Americans to perform a sundance.

But as high as the highs were, some of the hip-hop heads were beginning to wonder about what was really going on. Were they being paid fairly? Were they being exploited? Just how did this white downtown crowd really see them? Did being a part of the anti-Studio 54 only mean that the street kids got a chance to sniff coke, too?

Crazy Legs says, “The Roxy could have also been a zoo. People were able to hang out in the cage with us and feel safe from getting beat up or stuck up, as opposed to coming to the Bronx, coming to a jam. It’s like they were allowed to hang out in the cage and party with the animals, you know? It was a safe haven for a lot of people. But on the tip-side, it was also us getting into places that we never thought we could get into. So there was an exchange there.”

He concludes, “I’m not gonna sit here and act like, ‘Oh wow, it was so great back then!’ There were things—that was also the beginning of us getting jaded. I’m not bitter about it. I’m over that. But that’s a reality.”

Close to the Edge

Outside the floating world of the Roxy, Reagan’s recession had blotted unemployment levels to the highest levels since the Great Depression—30 million searching for work. The official Black unemployment rate hit 22 percent. Poverty rates were soaring too. Black poverty hit a twenty-five-year peak in 1983, with 36 percent of the population counted as living below the poverty
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level. It was much worse for young people. One estimate was that only one in five New York City teens had a job, only one in ten African Americans, the lowest ratios of youth employment in the country.4

After dark, DJs cut up Trouble Funk’s “Pump Me Up,” with its ironic command for people to dance their troubles away: “All we want to see is your body work!” But the Ronny night always opened into a Reagan morning that was more than a comedown. “The Message,” released just weeks after the Ronny opened, was a downers tune that perfectly captured that after-dinner crash when the buzz was off.5

It was credited to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, but the story behind that naming revealed other tensions as well. The song was a home-studio concoction of Sugar Hill songwriter and house band percussionist Ed “Duke Bootie” Fletcher, featuring a memorable synthesizer hook from Jiggi Chase, that seemed to bear the influence of Peter Tosh’s “Stepping Razor” and Black Uhuru’s Red. Bootie and Sugar Hill mogul Sylvia Robinson could not interest Flash in recording it. He and the rappers felt the song had no energy, that the lyrics would get them booted offstage by their hardcore fans. You went to a party to forget about shit like this.

But Robinson and Bootie recorded the track anyway, peeling off Furious Five rapper Melle Mal to add his last verse from a forgotten version of “Superman.” Robinson decided “The Message” had to be released as a single. Flash saw where this was going, and he pushed the rest of the Five into the studio to try to copy Bootie’s moves. It didn’t work. Instead, Bootie and Robinson added them at the end of the record, in streetwise arrest skit recalling Stevie Wonder’s interlude in “Living for the City.” But Pandora’s box had been opened. The ensuing tug-of-wars between the group and the label and between Mal and Flash resulted in Flash leaving Sugar Hill the following year. The video appeared, with Flash and the crew lip-syncing along to a rap only Mal had helped compose.

Sugar Hill’s second most important rap record had been as A&R-driven and market-driven as its first, and the consequences for hip-hop music were also far-reaching. Not only was “The Message” another boner for the rapper over the DJ, the crew itself became a dramatic casualty of rap’s realignment towards copyrights, trademarks, executives, agents, lawyers and worldwide audiences. By the end of 1983, there were two groups called the Furious Five, competing in civil court for the rights to the name, and dooming their creative fires under thousands of dollars of cocaine. From this point, questions of ownership and authorship would become hip-hop generation obsessions.

But Robinson’s instincts had been exactly right; the record became the fifth rap single to reach gold-selling status. The single certainly did not represent the first time post-’60s rappers had chosen to touch on themes of social dislocation and institutional racism—Kurtis Blow’s “The Breaks,” “Hard Times” and “Touchy,” Brother D and the Collective Effort’s “How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise,” and Tonya “Sweet Tea” Winkley’s “Victory Rap” were just some of the recorded examples. But because it was set to a beat too slow to rock a crowd, “The Message” focused the listener on Bootie and Melle’s vivid lyrics and their delivery—notorious for Rombo, but instead, by turns, resigned and enraged. Flash’s instincts had been correct, too: it was the grimmest, most downbeat rap ever heard.

And that vibe matched a rising disgust with Reaganomics, the culmination of fifteen years of benign neglect, and a sense of hopelessness that only seemed to be deepening. Liberal music critics who had been sitting on the fence about rap jumped off with both feet. “[It’s been] awfully easy to criticize mainstream, street-level rap for talking loud and saying nothing. No more,” wrote Vince Aletti in The Village Voice, praising the song’s chorus as “a slow chant seething with desperation and fury,” and the track’s “exhilarating, cinematic sprawl.”6

It’s among hip-hop history’s greatest ironies that “The Message,” so artificial and marginal by the standards of the culture then, would prove at once to be a song so truthful about the generation’s present and, in its righteous retail mord, so influential to that generation’s future culture.

Fun and Guns

The visions of “Planet Rock”—universal communion and transcendence—and “The Message”—ghetto strife and specificity—could only be brought together on the dance floor. But in the graffiti movement, both a bellwether and a vanguard, the contradictions were intensifying. Mike “Z2 THE WIZ” Martin, a king from Queens, says, “1982, in my opinion, was the beginning of the end for graffiti. That’s why I did as many pieces as I could during that time period. I knew it was the last hurrah.”
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Dondi White, for instance, had made his legend during the blackout of 1977. When the next summer morning came, the sixteen-year-old's name had been emblazoned over a staggering number of cars and he had begun his journey toward becoming the Stylemaster General. Five years later, he was leading the subway underworld for the light of the galleries—a carnival of openings, meetings, contracts, exhibitions. On Valentine's Day in 1982, he opened his first solo show at the dizzying, packed Fun Gallery.

The public face of the Fun Gallery was its magnetic co-director, Pati Astor, a '68er, sometime Warhol associate, and a former underground movie star, who had just finished a role in Wild Style playing a journalist who brings the hip-hop scene downtown. Her tiny storefront on the East Village became a more traditional gallery counterpart to the Bronx's freewheeling Fashion Moda. It was a downtown bastion from which a shortage of writers could catapult themselves into the art scene.

When it opened in August of 1981, it was a temporary space with no name. The artists would give it one when they showed there. "Kenny Scharf came up with 'Fun Gallery,'" Fab Five Freddy was next. He wanted to call it "The Serious Gallery." Astor said. "We stayed with 'Fun.'" Fab's show vaulted the gallery into the international spotlight. The East Village, once needle-stick somnambulant, was suddenly fun. At its peak, it featured over seventy galleries.

There was a growing duality in the movement. Some writers called the galleries their new yard. But they would never master the artworld the way they had their world of yards and transistor cops, toys and enemies. Years later, Elizabeth Hess would ask the question that was never answered at the time, "Was it their work or their class and racial exoticism that inspired patrons to support them and dealers to legitimize their unorthodox talents?" "Between '82 and '85 I created enough work to supply ten dealers in five galleries," Dondi told ZEPHYR. "The thing is, I felt if I wasn't painting then people would think I wasn't a real artist to begin with." Collectors dabbling in graffiti as radical chic wrapped the artists in an unfamiliar, uncomfortable strait-jacket of preconceptions and expectations.

It was becoming clear to the artists that while the biggest galleries were eager to make stars of Haring and Basquiat and Scharf, they saw the artists from the subways as bunch of primitives. ZEPHYR says, "One thing that always comes back in my mind is that CRASH, FUTURA—totally different artists, completely different aesthetics visually—all were struggling with the fact that the people who were presenting this work were often unwilling or unable to present those artists as individuals with a very distinct vision. Every artist had their own thing visually. But it didn't come out because very few of the dealer/owners, with a few exceptions, had the willingness to avoid group shows."

In 1981, the group shows had been a way for the smaller galleries to make their name and for marginal artists to join together to administer the shock of the new. By 1983, group shows were another form of marginalization. And even as the slightly tippy artworld toasted itself in opening itself to ghetto youth, the subway and street graf scene was undergoing an explosion of violence it had never seen before.

Mayor Ed Koch and the MTA's Richard Ravitch militarized the wards with $20 million worth of razorwire fences and guard dogs. The cars were white-washed, turned into "The Great White Fleet," and the MTA shifted its strategy towards defending the clean cars. Suddenly the amount of painting space dropped.

This problem was exacerbated by all of the media attention. At the same time, Chalffatt's and Cooper's photos, the anti-graffiti campaigns, the TV shows, the magazine articles and the gallery buzz swirled into a mega-TAKI effect.

In the past when a young toy was seen in the yard, he would be carrying the paintbag of a master. Now IZ was finding himself face to face in the yards with packs of thirty and forty little kids, descending in clouds of noise, hitting him up to tag their piece books, leaving empty cans all over the place, always setting off cop raids.

With the buff and the toy flood, a new breed of bombers took over. IZ says, "One of the cardinal rules of graffiti was you didn't go over somebody. And if you did, you made sure it was very clear it wasn't a dis. Like if somebody had a throw-up, you did a whole car and naturally you bailed it, so it wasn't disrespectful." Now, as Chalffatt and Silver would document in their brilliant documentary Style Wars, bombers like CAP ONE could overturn that rule. When the masterpieces were erased, the definition of fame changed,
the underlying structure of respect collapsed and graffiti's code of conduct unraveled.

To CAP, the distinction between his throw-up and your piece was meaningless. If you went over him, he was going to go over you—everywhere, he emphasized. He began attacking on multiple fronts. These cross-overs weren't, like Basquiat's, for play, they were for blood.

There had always been breakdowns, but now crews mobilized to defend themselves and their spaces, and more consciously and viciously policed their layups and yards. The crews sometimes spilled into block parties and neighborhood jams. There was, SPAR ONE says, "a whole war mentality. That's when I remember things started getting really violent."

At the High School of Art and Design, PINK curated a graffiti-art exhibit with twenty of the school’s best writers. She recalls, "We had a wonderful exhibit with canvases and big eight-foot panels, real standing, and illustrations and black books and the works. We had everything in glass cases, hung up. All in all, it was a successful opening and I went home at three that afternoon, I was all exhausted. And I catch my exhibit on the six o'clock news.

"Apparently CAP and PINK showed up, pulled out a .45 and shot my school full of holes. Shot one kid in the back. That was it. They closed the school the next day and the principal requested I just leave their school. I never graduated from the High School of Art and Design and the faculty really cracked down on graffiti writers after that."

Graffiti was caught between acceptance and rebellion, aspiration and motivation. EZ says, "It was getting to a point where beef was getting settled at gallery shows, because you couldn't find them anywhere else."

A World Tour
At the same time, the four elements were being packaged to tour for the first time outside of New York. As a measure of how big hip-hop was dreaming, the tour would bypass America and head straight for the Old World. In November, Xool Lady Blue sent the stars of the Roxxy to tour England and France.

Organized by French journalist and indie record label owner Bernard Zekri, the bill was headlined by Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force, and included the Rock Steady Crew, the World Champion Fantastic Four Double Dutch girls, FUTURA, DONDI, Grandmixer D.ST, and the Infinity Rappers, RANMELZEE and FAB 5 FREDDY.

FAB recalls, "Heads were like, 'Yo, what's our show goin' be, what we gon' do?' I thought about it, I said, 'Let me just tell you. Look, being that I got an art background I done seen some weird shit on the performance art tip. So no matter what we do onstage, we gon' always look cool. Just keep it real natural. Like if you just want to walk out onstage and give your man a pound or whatever, that's cool, that's how we gon' do it!"

David Herschkovits hopped on the bus to cover the tour for the New York Daily News. They planned to play seven dates in France and England on the two-week tour. "They had this whole show," he remembers, "It wasn't just a band, it was the graffiti and the breakdancers and the DJs and the whole experience."

After long bus trips broken up only by full-scale taggging and pillering attacks at the gas stops, the twenty-five-member entourage would head onstage to try to replicate the organic feel of the Roxxy for the crowds. DST spun, and his rappers rapped. Bambaataa got up and played and the b-boys would get up and dance as the spirit moved them. The Double Dutch girls headed up for a few routines. FAB and RANMELZEE took turns on the mike, while FUTURA and DONDI painted live pieces.

Herschkovits recalls, "Not too many people showed up to these shows. Especially some of these little towns where they didn't have a critical mass audience. They're not the hippest people out there. We'd play in some school gymnasium in some town, maybe fifty kids would show up. And the French are not demonstrative, even in Paris where there was a decent turnout. I remember looking at the people and they would just sort of be looking at each other trying to figure out if they should like it or not. They didn't know quite how to react. It was so new."

Zekri laughs, "Typical European audiences, man. But that's just the way it is. We were asked like really stupid questions like, 'Yo, are there trees in the Bronx?'"

In Strasbourg, France, they got a taste of that old Brux River unpredictability. Crazy legs recalls, "We did a show and there were these drunk people, and the Double Dutch girls were onstage doing their thing. They threw bottles at..."
Can't Stop Won't Stop

them." The music stopped. D.ST armed himself with a broken bottle, PHASE 2 picked up a chair. "Next thing you know, people were backstage talking about, 'We gon' get them!' DONDI led the people out there. DONDI had his belt with his name buckle on and the dudes caught a beachdown. After they got beat down, everybody stepped back onstage, and then the people in the audience started clapping! It went from a show to a brawl to getting applause." Bombaataa went back to playing his records, and their legend was sealed. By the time they reached Paris, the media came out to meet them like they were the real thing.

When the hip-hop heroes returned to the Roxie, the innocence seemed to be fading. ZEPHYR says, "Everyone was trying to hustle something. Someone had an angle, someone was like, 'Can I take your picture?' 'Can I make a movie about you?' 'Can I do a series of shows at The Kitchen with you?' 'Can I write an article in The Village Voice'?

Rolling Stone, People and Life came down with photographers and journalists. Fashion designers prepared their next year's lines by taking notes and training numbers with the graffiti writers. Post-disco indies like Tom Silverman, Casey Robbins and Steve Plotnicki of Profile Records, Aaron Fuchs of Tuff City Records or Will Socolow of Sleeping Bag Records might be buying artists' drinks at the bar. Soon these white-owned labels would eclipse the Black-owned ones; even the mighty Sugar Hill never recovered from the accumulating collapse of its biggest act, Flash and the Five. Harry Belafonte had begun to look up ideas for a multimillion-dollar Hollywood movie that would be called Night Street. A year later, the Roxey's owner ousted Kool Lady Blue. The dispute, she says, was over money.

A Little Story That Must Be Told
Perhaps the most lasting tribute to the spirit of '82 is the movie that Charlie Ahearn, Fab 5 Freddy, and Lee Quiltones gathered to talk about in the abandoned massage parlor in Times Square, Wild Style. The movie captured the sense of discovery, the new thing in all its raw, unpolished glory.

Perhaps much of its wonder had to do with its surrender to the culture. Ahearn--whose previous movie, The Deadly Art of Survival, had been shot on Super 8, with its main budget expense going to "buying pizza for the kids"--admits, "I'd never written a script. I really had no connection to the movie business whatsoever. I had never been to film school or been in the film business. But everyone accepted me as a Hollywood movie producer right off the bat. It was a matter of innocence on all sides."

Ahearn was out, he says, to make a "Bruce Lee movie. A simple hero, a simple story. Lee Quiltones was gonna be the hero. What is his problem? He's in love with this girl but she doesn't know he's the famous graffiti artist. That's it. That's all the movie is. And in a way, it reflected exactly how I saw things--in a comic book fashion."

The movie's principals were heads in the scene. There were no professional actors. PINK says, "There was a script that we all chuckled about. Picture that, a white guy just introduced to the scene and he's trying to write slang. That was funny!"

But Ahearn also truthfully described the scene's deepening schisms. ZEPHYR says, "The whole thing of the whole sensibilities of the downtown and the uptown, and the woman Neva who wants to seduce Lee--'Oh can I buy your painting? Oh sit down! All that shit seems like it's laughable when you watch the movie, and yet it all happened. All those things were so real. Charlie didn't say, 'I'm gonna parody the scene.'"

By now he was deep in it, enough to understand the subtleties of off-screen realities like PINK and Lee's tortured relationship. Lee had refused to star in the movie until Ahearn made two things clear. If he did it, he would be paid. If he didn't, someone else would have to do the scripted love scenes with PINK.

"When we shot the scene where Lee goes to the art collector, and he's supposed to be in bed with this woman, that could have been something else entirely," he says. "PINK found out that he was shooting this scene. She showed up at that apartment. She sat right between the camera and Lee the entire time. That's why he was so nervous. And like, you know, it was hard to direct."

During Charlie and Fab's yearlong advanced seminar in the post-%Rapper's Delight% club scene, they walked into a marque rivalry between Charlie Chose's Cold Crush Brothers and Grand Wizard Theodore's Fantastic Five Fresh, which became a major organizing theme for the movie. They caught the rappers on the stoop and in the limo, at the Dixie and the Amphitheatre, even on the basketball court. Over wickedly exciting dubplate special riddims--cut by
Blonde’s Chris Stein with FAB and a downtown session band and react Bronx-style by Theodore, Chase, DST and KK Rockwell—they captured three of the most electrifying, influential ensemble routines ever committed to tape.

Here was Fantastic’s Prince Whipped Whip, channeling H. Rap Brown: “I am the New Yorker, the sweet walker, the woman stalker, the jive talker, the money maker”—bragging about being “the least conceited.” And undefeated, at least until Cold Crush’s JDL dispersed him with a shrug: “If you still got money and you wanna bet, well I bet a hundred dollars that I’m not whipped yet.”

The movie’s climax was a feverish reimagining of a Bronx punk jam, another downtown presentation of the four elements, but with one crucial difference. Instead of taking hip-hop up-market, Wild Style went back to the people hip-hop came from. Ahearn had always been concerned about where he screened the work as much as what was being shown. That was why The Deadly Art of Survival and his hip-hop slides always looped back to be shown in their points of genesis: the Smith Houses, the Bronx clubs. His greatest ambition for Wild Style had been to screen it in Times Square for the b-boys and girls, the street rappers, the Five Percenters, all the folks from around the way. Here, once again, was representation as liberation, art as activism. So the show was staged at an abandoned amphitheater near the Williamsburg Bridge in East River Park.

The cast and crew cleaned it up and fixed it up and lue and others pointed it into full hip-hop glory. Then they invited all the neighborhoods to the party. In a sense, it really was a punk jam. No permits, no city fees, it was wholly a self-generated creation. The night of the shoot, thousands had gathered and the show was getting into full swing when the law finally showed up. As the police car pulled near the gate, Ahearn ran over, clipboard in hand, and said, “Oh man, I’m so glad you guys showed up. We thought you would never get here. We just need you to stand right here and help us keep this thing together.” The cops took one look at the scene, got back in their car, and drove off, never to return.

Aside from such regular displays of improvisational genius from the producers and performers, the brilliance of Wild Style lay in the decision of Charlie and FAB never to cork the ferocious competitive energy, the feverish call-and-response, the phantasmic sense of possibility present in a hip-hop moment. Wild Style remains the only hip-hop film and soundtrack that adequately conveys the communal thrill of merging with the tide, riding the lightning.

The is timeless moment of Wild Style is the right before Reagan’s morning, sort of mourning, in America. Shocked is talking homelessness like a prophet, Ikonoklast poet RAMMELLzee raps onstage waving a sawed-off shotgun in one hand, reaching down and pulling rhymes out his pocket with the other. One second he’s stepping out at Cypress Hills, beating down a toy with his del graviti, the next he’s signing off with an apple pie florist, shouting out the Rock Steady on the tinola and the cops in the crowd. That ricochet unpredictability, that badder-than-bad, bolder-than-bold chest-thumping, the volatile combo of sociocultural disbelieving and Sunday-morning faith it inspired in anyone it touched—all this was Wild Style’s, and 1982’s gift to the world.
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 him jobs and pay 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, boarded 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" Wheatalb
and Darrell "K-Doe" 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 UFO 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, Alonzo 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" Ciarabry and Andre "Dr. Dre" Young spinning records. They were members of the Cru, but had a more sideline hustle going and were learning to make beats in Alonzo's studio. They were also two of the first DJs on KDAY's AM hip-hop radio station to join the trend-making Mo.Momasters 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 Dent. He told them how and what to rap—fisty, 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 a single for Alonzo's Ku-Cut Records.

Dre kicked in the bass for C.I.A.'s three cuts. "My Posse" and "Illegal" were Beastie Boys' hits that replaced references to White Castle with lines about crawling down Crenshaw. On the third track, "Just 4 the Cash," Cube rapped, "It's all about making those dollars and cents." Now they were indentured to Alonzo, 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 Alonzo'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 jettisoning Zulu Nation DJ Afrika Bama.

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 Campbellclackers, in the early 70s; popping, a singing, 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 cholo rolls rolled down to the club in their4 founders, 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 Trilobe—alone.

When Radio faded, live hip-hop parties spread through the efforts of a popular sound system called Uncle Jam's Army, led by Rodgers "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 Carwin-Vega speakers in the shape of pyramids.

Then shit turned real bad real quick.
creativity in exchange for security would prove his downfall over and over again.

One of the records in heavy rotation on KDNY was by Russ Parr's local comedy rap act Bobby Jimmy and the Critics, a track called "New York Rapper" in which Parr covered Run DMC, LL Cool J, the Beastie Boys, Eric B & Rakim, UTPD, 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 roughty, cartoonish sound or imitate serious-as-cancer New York. Lonzo was milking a fourteen-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 non-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, Jaylow, and Wright looked at each other—now what? Dre suggested that Wright to 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, Easy 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 Sugeues, Wright's hustle and Dre and Yello's radio pull was getting the record off the ground. By the end of 1987, it was the most requested record on KDNY. Wright went from selling the record off the trunk to swap meet vendors and retailers to a distribution deal with India vanity label Mascado. 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. 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 childhood friend Kilo G cruising around looking for critics to kick. Then he catches his crooked head 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 "reaches 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 wasn't be given bail, so he sets off on 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 Gaines pulp world. But then there was the unexpected finale.

Kilo makes his trial appearance and there his girlfriend, Sozy, takes up guns against the state. In the gunshot, Sozy seems bulletproof. The deputies can't stop her. Instead she goes out on her feel, not on her knees, getting sent up for a bid just like her man, bashed in 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 name 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, Floyto Drungo 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 straining against 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, "[Because 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's 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 atrode into the Marin County Courthouse where a prisoner named John McClain was defending himself against charges he had robbed a prison guard. Two other prisoners, Russell 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, gentlemen, I'm taking over now."

Jackson taped a gun to the judge's head, took several jurors and the district attorney hostage, 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...
Can't Stop Won't Stop

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." He considered Jonathan "a soldier of the people," on image that would find a different resonance in the Los Angeles street wars of the '80s.

Whether Cube had intended, or not, "Boyz-N-The Hood" recovered the painful memory. Tracking the lives of Compton hardrock "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 boost: "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 lumpy robotic tac 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 adrenaline-infused, heart-poundingly 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 Shoiku would put it, "the ashes and ruins of the sixties."

Watts was a desolate, treeless area located in a gulley 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.

While the UNIA and the Urban League had established offices in the city by the 1920s, Los Angeles' 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."

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-
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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. 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 conditions were the result of a policy of "redlining"—a practice that excluded people of color from accessing credit and loans for housing and other financial services. This policy was exacerbated by the segregation policies that were in place during the 20th century. The result was a perpetuation of poverty and segregation, which continues to this day.

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 rushed 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 splitting 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. 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 Stovers, the Gladators and the mainly Chicano set, Watts Gang V—which had temporarily dropped their rivalries.
"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." Later he called the rioters "monkeys in a zoo." By the evening, the LAPD and the Sheriffs 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. Newspaper headlines read AMERICAN U.S.A. 23

The National Guard arrived the next day. The death toll peaked sharply in the last two days of civil unrest. Riots 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 hub of political and cultural activity. Author Odie Hawkins wrote, "Watts, post-drought, 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 these things thought they were." 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 loaded 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." Maulana Ron Karenga put together the US Organization by recruiting the Gladiators and the Businessmen. Members of the Stasons and the Orientals formed the Sons of Watts, another cultural nationalist organization. The powerful Stason leader Al-prentice "Bunchy" Carter led many more ex-Stasons and other gang members to rejoin Karenga and the cultural nationalists and affiliate with the revolutionary nationalist Black Panthers. On 103rd Street, the Black Panthers set up an office next to the Watts Happening Coffee House, which housed Malin, 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 Daoo'o, and three young poets that would call themselves the Watts Prophets.

Anthony "Arenda" Hamilton, a Watts native, was an ex-convict and an activist who found the Workshop through Hawkins. Soon he was working at Malin 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 kids ain't got nothin' left, 'cause I'll take it!"

Through the happenings on 103rd Street, Hamilton met Richard Dewolufu, a Louisiana transient, and Otsa O'Solomon (then Otis Smith) from Alabama. They began performing poetry with a female pianist Dee Dee O'Neal, and sang accompanying. 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 over-sized 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 worthy pessimism. On "A Fimp," 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 bravest 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 Stasons, as well as its roughneck inner-core army, the Stason 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 niggah" all
Can't Stop Won't Stop

at the same time—considered," Elaine Brown wrote, "the most dangerous Black man in Los Angeles." The Sloussons had started at Fremont High in Watts, but Carter now commanded the love of Black teens of the high schools in South Central. His bodyguard was a Vietnam veteran named Elmer Pratt, whom he renamed Geronimo J-Jago. 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 off 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 Sloussons 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. 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. 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 thing, Eastside Cuz. This is going to be the most notorious gang in the world. It’s going to go from generation to generation."
dead in prison, killed by a rival, and 155 goings claimed 30,000 members across the city.31

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 30,000 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 dramati- cally altered state and local government financing, launching a national tax revolt and permanently plunging the state into the cruellest 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 “postliberal Los Angeles,” security fences and security forces sprang 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 per- cent for youths.44 The median household income there was just half the state me-
dian. 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 alleviate massive numbers of youths.

The Sound of the Battzerrn

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 this new repression was the Battazern—a V-100 armored military vehicle equipped with a massive battering ram that police used to barge into suspected crack houses. With the drug war in full swing, the Battazern was getting a lot of ac-
tion.

By the summer of 1985, nineteen-year-old rapper Teddy Tee’s “Battazern” tape was the most popular cassette on the streets. Telling a story of a working-class family man whose life is interrupted by clackheads and the Battzerm, the tape was one of the first to describe the changing streets. Teddy had written and recorded the rap in his bedroom as he watched the Battazern crash through a crackhouse live on television, then duplicated the initial copies on a cheap dub-bing deck, and gone out in the streets to hawk them. To his surprise, the song be-came 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 Funky 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 Lonzio'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-stop 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--Todd, King Tee, Coo-lio, 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 PCE—better known in the hood as "sherm" or "water." 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 backbreakingly 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 is 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?"

Hip-hop was close to the underground economy because, more often than not, it was being made by youths who were not explotable, but expendable. The Riotland 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 SuCal 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 offices 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,
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 hearty-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 bassed up the kick drum, cued an insistent double-time ishhat, and added a "Yeah! Huh!" affirmation and a scratched snare to propel the beat forward. Then he inserted an sustained horn line and a staccato guitar riff to increase the pre-millenial 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. Highpitched horn stabs lit up the tracks like rocket launchers.

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

Rejection 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 throwdowns like Rockim and Chuck talked control and discipline. By contrast, excess was the essence of N.W.A.'s appeal. These poems celebrated pushers, played bitches, killed enemies, and assassinated police. F**k 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'd 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 miss 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 dancefloor-fillers Dre and Arabian Prince were doing for pop crossover acts like J.J. Fad, C-N-N-Tel, the Sleeve Boyz, and Dre's then-girlfriend Michelle'. J.J. Fad's Supersonic: The Album had easily outsold Easy Duz It. But all these songs were like echoes of Eva'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 rest of the chorus—KRS-One’s pronouncement “It’s not about a lobby, it’s all about reality.” But the monster stuck, naming the theatrics and the threat, the liberating word/sound 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 Eddy Dunne 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 individuality, “get mine” creed, gangsta rap fit hand-in-glove with a multicultural youth demographic weaned on racism and Realism, 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 firsthand the voice 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 fatty, and danced to their own murder rap.

As capital fled deindustrialized inner cities and innoeount 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 recombiant nationalism and Rakim’s streetwise spirituality, 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 septet-toned videoblog, 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, stung with Reagan arrogance, 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...
Can't Stop Won't Stop

... 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 Ganga

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

The shot that launched the War on Ganga 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 Froshmen Row.

There on January 30, 1988, in the teeming Saturday night crowd of students, wealthy wasteliers, and youths who had come from throughout the city to cruise the Village, a Rolling 60's Crip named Durrell DeWitt "Baby Rock" Collins spotted an enemy from the Manfield Hustler Crips walking up Braxton 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' rival struck her in the head.52 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 Ganga.

On August 1, in what was supposed to be Operation Hammer's crowning moment, Gates brought the War on Ganga 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 59th Street and Douglas Avenue in South Central Los Angeles. Cops stormed through the two buildings, taking aim on furniture and walls, overturning washing machines and ovens, smashing mirrors, toilets and stereo, rounding up residents and beating dozens of them. They spray-painted LAPD RULES and ROLLIN 30 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.54 "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.55"

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. As a result, 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 myth of the Hammer did not add up. By 1992, the city was paying out $11 million annually in brutality settlements while allocating...
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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.34

Twilight Bae, a former Cirkle City Pimp, described to hip-hop journalist 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 col-

lar, 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 become 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 con-

stantly 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

The Culture Assassins

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 N.W.A. was in full effect. That month, the newsletter Focus On The Family Citizen bore the headline "RAP GROUP N.W.A. 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 N.W.A. shows in Toledo and Milwaukee. In Cincinnati, fed-

eral agents subjected the crew to drug searches, asking if they were I.A. gang members using their tour as a front to expand their crack-selling operations. Nothing was ever found.35

In August, FBI assistant director Mitt Akerich 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 enforce-

ment 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 officials ded-

icate 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.36

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

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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 Pollock broke the Akinfeev 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 scatter-shot 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 odds had become hip-hop progressive, deeply influenced by their elders' Third World liberation politics but drawn to the rapidly transforming landscape of pop culture's present. The media drum holding back representations of youth 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 scary dilemma. There was the lam-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 shrilling 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 heartpounding power. Bay Area hip-hop DJs Dawey D and Kevin "Kevey Kev" Montague led a boycott of NWA and Easy 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 militarily 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 criti-
cisms, but silenced them by shouting them down. Delirious and confident, Yella even disclosed the in-joke, scratching in a female voice, "Hoping all you sophis-
ticated 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 niggers 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 pro-
gressive to confront his or her relationship to the music and choose sides.

When Straight Outta Compton crossed over to white audiences, things be-
came 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 dif-
ficult to defend. To the hip-hop progressives, it sometimes seemed less than a cul-
tural effect of material realities, a catalyst for progressive discussion, or objec-
tive 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 objec-
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In the photo for a 1990 Source cover story, Easy E aimed his 9mm at the
Can't Stop Won't Stop

reader, over the cover line, the GANGLSTA RAPPER: VIOLENT HERO OR NEGATIVE ROLE MODEL? Inside, a fierce debate raged over gangsta rap. David Mills asked, "If you 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 Drugs, the War on Youth. As Rob Morrow, 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 wrongheaded 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 compete 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 'Dope Man' 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."