

N . W . A

"Hard rap, like punk, brought together a self-selected community of kids by becoming an image of what their parents feared most."
- Johnathan Gold/LA Weekly, 1989

N.W.A, the world's most notorious and dangerous group paved a then unknown road in hard-core rap music. Eazy E (Eric Wright), former drug dealer turned record executive founded Ruthless Records in 1986 as a way to get paid, plain and simple. Along with the two producers of the World Class Wreckin' Cru-Dr. Dre (Andre Young) and DJ Yella (Antoine Carraby), a local MC named Ren (Lorenzo Patterson), and a talented rapper/writer from a crew called CIA--Ice Cube (Oshea Jackson), the nucleus of N.W.A was formed. The deal was not to make the regular danceable pop records of the day that could easily, garner airplay (although one of Dr. Dre's first multiplatinum hits was for a girls trio called JJ Fad and their hit single "Supersonic"), but to instead push the edge, to come out--essentially-with black punk rock records, that pushed the limits of profanity, violence, and all that "Normal" society, deemed as decent.

In 1988. N.W.A. released **Straight Outta Compton**, rap music's recorded equivalent to *A Clockwork Orange* on analog tape. The milk had been traded

in for the Olde English 40 ounce, Beethoven for Charles Wright and the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band, and droogs for niggaz, but the nihilistic attitudes remained the same- Eazy-E, Dr. Dre. Ice Cube, MC Ren, and DJ Yella empowered themselves against a system that they felt brutalized them, taking the battles to the street. Dressed in black, executioner style, they did a drive-by on an urban musical art form that, in their opinion, was scared to kick reality. Over a taut stripped down beat, testosterone pumping. Ice Cube laid down new ultra violent maxims for the rest of the rap industry.

"Straight Outta Compton, crazy muthafucka named Ice Cube/From the gang called Niggaz With Attitudes/When I'm called off. I got a sawed off, squeeze the trigger, and bodies are hauled oft/You



too boy if you fuck with me/Off your ass!/That's how I'm going out/For the punk motherfucker's that's showing out.... Here's a murder rap to keep you dancin'/With a crime record like Charles Manson/AK-47 is the tool/Don't make me act a motherfuckin' fool So when I'm in your

*neighborhood. you better duck/Cause Ice
Cube is crazy as fuck . . . "*

Not satisfied with just being gangsters, N.W.A also took on an historically brutal LAPD with the incendiary "Fuck Tha Police." promising to smoke any corrupt police officer unlucky enough to cross their path. This was later proven to be prophetic with the Rodney King beating. Painting a bleak landscape of cold world hustlaz, bitches, crooked cops, and smoked out crack-fiend, survival was the name of the game by any means necessary. Ice Cube speaks for an entire lost generation by countering his critics rhetorically in "Gangsta Gangsta." It is a breath-taking visual cruising song, where the Boys, on a metaphoric level, cruise around looking to break up parties, harass women, and get in any trouble that comes their way.



*"Drinking 8-Ball straight out the
bottle. Do I look like a motherfuckin' role
model? Little kid looking up to me-
life ain't nothing but bitches and
money."*

Conservative critics ran for cover, Police groups and the FBI's Office of Public Affairs tried to have the music banned, but the American public loved N.W.A. Without the benefit of heavy radio or video play. both **Straight Outta Compton** and Eazy-E's **Eazy Duz It**, quickly went double platinum (2,000,000) in a matter of months. Quite simply, the group changed the face of hip-hop. While many might accuse them of being responsible for half the violent sentiments and misogyny expressed in rap nowadays, they liberated the art form by showing that a black artist could express any viewpoint, even if the government worked against it, and still reach the people in black and white communities around the world. If anything, songs like "Fuck Tha Police," and "Gangsta Gangsta" were the Hardcore Hip Hop Nation's Declaration of Independence and Bill Of Rights--it liberated the genre from the plastic, "safe" rap of Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince and Young MC at a time when young black urban males didn't have a voice that could express their anger and frustration with a system that clearly didn't give a damn about them. "What Jazzy Jeff and rappers like them talk about is phony, man," MC Ren expressed in a 1989 interview with the Los Angeles Times. "They're not talking about what's really happening out there. They're talking about what the white world and the

white kids can identify with. If you're a black kid from the street, and somebody is rapping about parent's not understanding (Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince's Grammy winning hit at the time was "Parents Just Don't Understand"), you'd laugh at that. You might not have parents or you'd have parents that were into crack and prostitution."

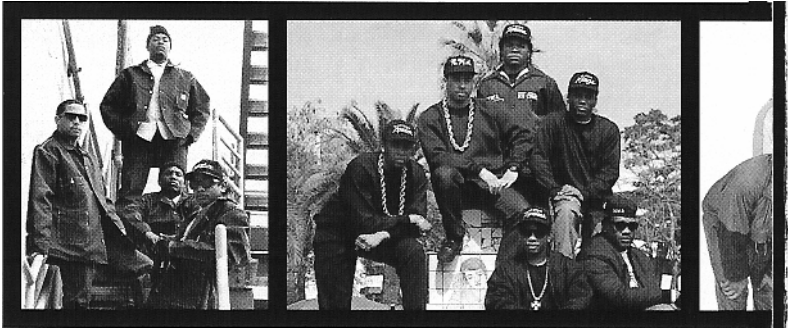
"Gangsta Gangsta," "If It Ain't Ruff" and "Express Yourself"

changed the way West Coast Rap sounded. Shifting the music away from the bass farting, fast paced electro-beats that first characterized the genre, Dr. Dre and DJ Yella slowed the

down. They brought funk to the game, and made the musical landscape harder by using some of the same rugged breakbeat's their East Coast counterparts were using. Long Island's Public Enemy and De La Soul, also at their most groundbreaking in terms of pushing the musical limits of hip-hop music, made a lot of the N.W.A stuff seem primitive, but the rough attitudes and dynamite lyrics is what helped the Compton impresarios win the love and respect of the entire country. As Dr. Dre would later say to *Rolling Stone* about the songs on **Straight Outta Compton**, still considered by many to be the most influential rap

LP of all time: "To this day, I can't stand that album. I threw that thing together in 6 weeks so we could have something to sell out of the

When Ice Cube, the group's primary vocalist and lyric-smith, broke away from the crew over a financial dispute, many fans thought the group was done for. Cube traveled to New York's Greene Street Studios to record **AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted** with Public Enemy's Bomb



The result was a hip hop masterpiece, an album that took N.W.A's belligerent nigga concept to a higher level, while musically conquering almost everything the East Coast had ever produced. This garnered Ice Cube a huge East Coast following, giving him a coast to coast domination that made him, for the time, the King of Hip-Hop.

Instead of buckling under the scrutiny and the pressure, N.W.A. with Dr. Dre's persistence, went on to record the best album of their career, the classic EP, **100 Miles And Runnin'**, and the

absolutely stellar **Efil4zaggin**. Surprisingly, songs like "Just Don't Bite It" and "One Less Bitch" were even more violent and misogynistic than anything the group had ever recorded, but the music had a clarity and an energy that was unparalleled. The smooth pop elegance of "Always Into Somethin'" garnered the group their second widespread radio hit, but expressed enough hard attitudes through the slick production and hard-edged lyrics that the fans didn't see it as a sellout.



The gritty guitar driven vehemence of "Real Niggaz Don't Die," the relentless thump of "Real Niggaz" and the marauding "100 Miles

And Runnin'" have undeniable power it's impossible to sit still while listening to them. Like any powerful rap song, the beats make the listener feel as if he's a part of the world created by Dr. Dre's super sonics-it's not unlike being jacked in someone else's brain, and feeling the adrenaline rush of a bank robbery or mission gone bad, ala Ralph Fiennes in Katherine Bigelow's pre-apocalyptic "Strange Days." No matter how ugly the sentiments expressed, or shocking the norms, it's like witnessing a gruesome piece of cinematic violence by John Woo - you just can't turn away. Maybe the late Eazy-E summarized it best when he told the *Los Angeles Times* that "Kids want to hear about the reality of their

situations--not fairy tales. They don't care if it's ugly, they want reality."

Eight years after **Straight Outta Compton** changed music as we know it. everything has changed, yet nothing has changed. Eazy-E, sadly, has died of AIDS, but not before he made Ruthless Records one of the most ground breaking and financially successful independent labels of all time. Ice Cube not only has one of the most successful solo careers of all time, he's also a successful actor (Boyz-N-The Hood, Higher Learning) and screenwriter (Friday). Dr. Dre is now widely regarded as one of the most important black music producers of all time, with a musical ear and influence that some think could eventually rival that of Quincy Jones. Death Row Records, on the success of his albums, **The Chronic** and **Doggystyle**, made over 100 million dollars in a two year period. MC Ren and Yella have also moved on to important solo careers, all thanks to the success of a few records engineered, like Dr. Dre quips, to sell out of the back of a trunk at the Compton Swap Meet.

Gangsta rap, despite the fact that the genre has often lost its ability to thrill, excite, terrify, and even fascinate as it once did when N.W.A held the reins, lacks character. **N.W.A's Greatest Hits** not only reminds old fans and new that the world's most dangerous group did it first - they did it best. Music, as a means of expressing the most beautiful, ugly, and even violent sentiments ever known to man is better off for it.

Cheo Hodari Coker is a staff writer for the Los Angeles Times' Calendar