

Niggaz Wit Attitude

IN 1988, RAP FOUND ITS VOICE. AND IT WAS FUCKIN' PISSED.

As Dr. Dre was entering his mid-twenties and producing an increasingly diverse group of artists in his native Compton, California, twenty-three-year-old Eazy-E was looking for a way to invest his proceeds from drug dealing into a legal venture. DJ Yella, Dr. Dre's twenty-year-old production partner, was experiencing the clash between the R&B and rap worlds, while seventeen-year-old Compton resident MC Ren was becoming more and more enraged with the reality of being a poor, young, black male in suburban Los Angeles. At the same time, nineteen-year-old Ice Cube was shuttling between school in Arizona and his parents' house in South Central Los Angeles.

While the members of N.W.A (Niggaz Wit Attitude) navigated their respective travails, the exploding crack epidemic was having an especially devastating impact in black urban neighborhoods, as were the draconian drug policies of President Reagan's second term, which seemed to target the poor. The enforcement of the Rockefeller Drug Laws, with the help of a militarized police force, filled new private prisons with tens of thousands of petty drug users and sellers—many of

OPPOSITE:
Eazy-E & N.W.A went from popular singles to multi-platinum albums.

TIMELINE OF RAP

1988

Key Rap Releases

1. N.W.A's *Straight Outta Compton* album
2. Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* album
3. Slick Rick's *The Great Adventures of Slick Rick* album

US President

Ronald Reagan

Something Else

Al-Qaeda formed in Pakistan.

whom were black—for fifteen-year to life sentences. As a result, a generation of poor and disenfranchised children often had to look outside their own households for male role models.

"These kids growing up in the eighties, they never had a father figure," Kendrick Lamar said. "I was the only one out of my homeboys in my neighborhood that had a pops in my life. He wasn't perfect. He was still in the streets, but he was always there to pull me back in whenever I bumped my head. Other kids didn't have that, so they go out into the streets and their father figures are the big homies down the block."

These "fatherless" children turned to the streets to find a family unit, often through sports, gangs, crime, or, thanks to the emerging hip-hop culture, rap music.

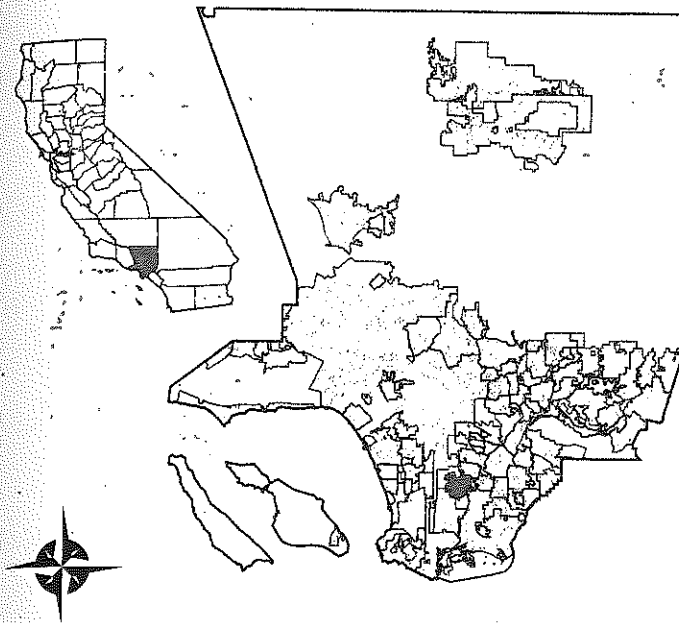
At this point, rap was in the midst of what would be considered by much of the genre's cognoscenti as its golden era. In 1988, the genre graduated from a curiosity into a full-blown national musical movement thanks to an explosion of trailblazing albums from artists who would become key figures in its development.

Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, for instance, is viewed as the best rap album of all time by many rap scholars because of the unique pro-black lyrical fury of Chuck D and its revolutionary aural tactics. Producers the Bomb Squad cut and pasted musical samples, speeches from black leaders, and wild sound effects into a mesmerizing mix that entered new sonic territory, all of whose heft was balanced out by Chuck D's comedic rhyme foil, Flavor Flav.

In the aftermath of DJ Scott La Rock's murder, Boogie Down Productions shifted from being a gangster rap group to one delivering edutainment with their *By All Means Necessary* album. Eric B. & Rakim followed up their landmark 1987 album, *Paid in Full*, with *Follow the Leader*, whose "Microphone Fiend" and "Follow the Leader" singles showcased Rakim's steely, poised, and precise delivery, as well as his poetic prowess. Slick Rick's *The Great Adventures of Slick Rick* featured his comedic tales, while Big Daddy Kane's *Long Live the Kane* established him as one of the most versatile rappers in the genre, one equally adept at delivering social commentary, braggadocio, and material catering to women.

As gangster rap gained traction in the music industry thanks to the success of Schoolly D, Ice-T, Boogie Down Productions, and Just-Ice, rap remained a largely New York movement, with Empire State artists releasing the majority of the material and selling the most units, as well as the most concert tickets, often in major metropolitan hubs like Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston. Bucking this trend, Ice-T released his second gold album, *Power*, in 1988.

SETTING THE SCENE



PHYSICAL LOCATION: Compton

DATE OF INCORPORATION: May 1888

SIZE: 10.2 square miles

POPULATION: 81,286 (as of 1980), 90,454 (as of 1990)

BLACK PEOPLE LIVING IN COMPTON: 48,570 (as of 1990)

HISPANIC PEOPLE LIVING IN COMPTON: 38,316 (as of 1990)

WHITE PEOPLE LIVING IN COMPTON: 1,613 (as of 1990)

FAMOUS PEOPLE BORN OR RAISED IN COMPTON:

former NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle; National Baseball Hall of Fame member Duke Snider; Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic; and actors James Coburn and Kevin Costner

YEARS BETWEEN INCORPORATION AND BECOMING GROUND ZERO FOR GANGSTER RAP: 100

In the same year, Oakland, California, rapper Too \$hort offered a sexually explicit look at the world of street-level pimps and prostitutes on the platinum *Life Is... Too \$hort*; Compton, California, rapper King Tee blended a b-boy sensibility with a gangster ethos on *Act a Fool*; and Philadelphia duo D.J. Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince became crossover kings with the lighthearted *He's the DJ, I'm the Rapper*. Yet it was an album from a previously anonymous Los Angeles suburb that was the tipping point for changing the geographical and contextual premise of rap—and, arguably, music history.

Released in its initial version on August 8, 1988, N.W.A's *Straight Outta Compton* set in motion a tidal wave that still resonates throughout music today. Yet, despite its monumental importance, *Straight Outta Compton* had a hard time finding a home, and its most famous song almost didn't get recorded, let alone released.

The individual members of N.W.A took varied routes to stardom. Dr. Dre and DJ Yella were members of the Prince-inspired electro/R&B/rap group World Class Wreckin' Cru, which enjoyed local success in the mideighties with the independent

single "Surgery." The group's regional success earned them a short-lived major recording contract with Epic Records (home to Michael Jackson at the time). The Cru quickly returned to the independent world, though, and scored another hit in 1987 with "Turn Off the Lights," a steamy R&B collaboration with Dr. Dre's then-girlfriend Michelle.

As World Class Wreckin' Cru released light fare, Ice Cube was in the group C.I.A. (Cru' in Action!) with rapper Kid Disaster (K-Dee) and DJ/producer Sir Jinx, who happened to be Dr. Dre's cousin. At the same time, Eazy-E's friend MC Ren was a talented rapper from Compton whose rage was starting to boil.

With fewer than ninety thousand people living in Compton in the mideighties and a tiny music scene, Dr. Dre and Eazy-E befriended each other just as World Class Wreckin' Cru was having creative differences. Group leader Alonzo Williams wanted to remain true to the electro dance scene the Cru and such acts as Egyptian Lover and Arabian Prince had helped popularize. Williams also had become tired of bailing Dr. Dre out of jail for a series of minor offenses, so the next time Dr. Dre needed someone to get him from behind bars, he rang Eazy-E. Always the businessman, Eazy-E wanted Dre to reciprocate his generosity by helping him produce some songs for the rap crews he was working with at the time.

Williams's pushing Dr. Dre away professionally and personally coincided with rap's surging popularity in the streets. As the members of N.W.A and the

acts surrounding them began collaborating, Eazy-E started pestering Williams to meet with veteran music industry manager and promoter Jerry Heller, who had worked with Elton John, Marvin Gaye, and others in the sixties and seventies. Eazy-E paid Williams \$750 to meet Heller, a man who provided Eazy-E with something he lacked: knowledge of the music business.

Eazy-E and Heller, twenty-four years his senior, met at Macola Records, a local pressing plant and indie record distributor, where Eazy-E played him "The Boyz-N-The Hood." Like Schoolly D's "P.S.K. What Does It Mean?" and Ice-T's "6 'N the Mornin'" before it, "The Boyz-N-The Hood" provided a look at a world most of mainstream America knew nothing about. In the version of Compton Eazy-E rapped about (with lyrics written by South Central Los Angeles resident Ice Cube), he positioned himself as the ultimate gangster, operating without remorse as he stopped by the local park and shot and killed a friend who stole his radio (coverage of the song's fictitious murder appeared on the front of the *Los Angeles Times*). From there, Eazy-E picked up his girl and got in an altercation with her before he "reached back like a pimp and slapped the hoe" and also knocked out her father, who was trying to defend her.

The song concludes with Eazy-E heading to court to bail his friends out, only to witness a courtroom shoot-out initiated by his friend's Uzi-toting girlfriend.

He yelled out "Fire," then came Suzy / The bitch came in with a sub-machine Uzi / Police shot the girl but didn't hurt her / Both upstate for attempted murder

GANGSTER RAP

THE TERM *GANGSTER RAP* was coined by the media. *Los Angeles Times* writer Robert Hilburn's 1989 article in which he referred to Ice-T popularizing "the L.A. gangster rap image" is cited as the first time the term was used in print. Prior to the term's usage, most acts considered themselves reality rappers and street reporters. Here, artists opine about the term.

MC Ren: "The gangster rap title, it's like a division. I see a lot of cats embrace it, like 'We do gangster rap.' But you probably can't find nothing with me saying I do gangster rap, or I did gangster rap. It's just hip-hop to me."

DJ Quik: "That's like a label put on you by somebody that's trying to keep the law on you. Put this light on it."

Paris (known as the Black Panther of Hip-Hop): "I think people just assigned young, black men who were doing music and looked a particular way, they just painted us all with the same brush. The violence in the lyrics and the imagery is what got us on people's radar, although the violence I was talking about was completely different than the violence other people were talking about."

Cormega: "I hate the term gangster rap. The media created that word. I've been around hip-hop most of my life, and I've never heard a rapper say, 'I'm about to go make some gangster rap.' It was something the media used to stigmatize us because they didn't respect hip-hop as a culture, period. I'd rather call it reality rap."

CJ Mac: "I think this genre has been named gangster rap by the media. We're just talking about how we lived and the things that we saw around here, and that's what we reported and made music to."

MASTERCED AT: Bernie Grundman Mastering
MASTERCED BY: Brian "Big Bass" Gardner

BRIAN "BIG BASS" GARDNER

THE MUSIC RELEASED on Ruthless Records benefitted from Dr. Dre and DJ Yella's brilliant production, but it also had some other key contributors. One of them was Brian "Big Bass" Gardner, who began working at Bernie Grundman Mastering in Hollywood in the mideighties and who worked on early Eazy-E and N.W.A releases, including *Straight Outta Compton*. He earned the "Big Bass" moniker because of the bottom he put into records in the postproduction process, a significant factor in the appeal of rap records. "He put bass in your shit," platinum Compton, California, rapper-producer and audiophile DJ Quik said. "He put bass in your records. He just made it sound big and bassy, like 'Ooooh.' He'd give you a bass bump. It was like getting a double cheeseburger for the price of a single cheeseburger. It was an extra patty and cheese. Ask anyone. Ask Michael Jackson if he was still here, rest in peace. Ask the Jacksons. They'll tell you."



KING TEE

THE FIRST PROMINENT rapper from Compton, King Tee released singles "Payback's a Mutha," "The Coolest," and "Ya Better Bring a Gun" in 1987 on Techno Hop Records/Macola Records. Tila, as he's also known, then signed to Ice-T's Rhyme Syndicate management company and released three acclaimed albums—1988's *Act a Fool*, 1990's *At Your Own Risk*, and 1993's *Tha Triflin' Album*—on Capitol Records (home of the Beatles). The music from the Marley Marl remix of "At Your Own Risk" was used as the theme music for BET's hit *Rap City* program. King Tee is also the leader of the Likwit Crew, a collective of artists including Tha Alkaholiks and Xzibit. He later changed his name to King T and recorded the *Thy Kingdom Come* album for Dr. Dre's Aftermath Entertainment, though it was not released as planned in 1998. Dr. Dre did feature King T on "Some L.A. Niggaz," a song from his 2001 album.

But where Schoolly D rapped with a tinge of menace and Ice-T rhymed with alternating caution and excitement about the criminal world he was describing, Eazy-E's nonchalance in detailing the chaos he created and witnessed made him the ultimate gangster: an ambivalent participant in a world where the line between life and death, incarceration and freedom is often razor thin.

Even though he was essentially new to rap, Heller was sold on Eazy-E's potential and on "The Boyz-N-The Hood," later calling it "the most important rap music I had ever heard. This was the Rolling Stones, the Black Panthers, Gil Scott-Heron; this was music that would change everything."

With no musical industry connections, Eazy-E used Macola Records, the same pay-for-pressing Los Angeles-based label that also handled some of World Class Wreckin' Cru's material, to release three Ice Cube-written songs in 1987 on his upstart Ruthless Records: "The Boyz-N-The Hood," "Fat Girl," and "L.A. Is the Place." "Fat Girl" features sophomoric humor and "L.A. Is the Place" highlights Los Angeles's glamorous side, as well as its violent underbelly. To be sure, though, it was "The Boyz-N-The Hood" that struck a chord with listeners.

"I knew it was special because of the reaction it would get from people," Ice Cube said. "They loved it. Niggas was beating down our doors for the next song. We had a few singles out there, and we knew the reaction. It was just going in there and doing an album."

Eazy-E and the loose collection of artists he had assembled recorded several songs that ended up on various versions of the *N.W.A and the Posse* compilation, Eazy-E's "The Boyz-N-The Hood" and N.W.A's "8 Ball," "A Bitch Iz A Bitch," and "Dope Man" chief among them. In addition to the artists who would eventually make up N.W.A, *N.W.A and the Posse* (originally released in 1987) also featured the Fila Fresh Crew, a group fronted by the D.O.C., a Dallas transplant whose way with words and keen phraseology made him an invaluable asset to

the burgeoning musical juggernaut. The D.O.C. became a trusted Dr. Dre confidant and writer for N.W.A's material. He was, effectively, an auxiliary member of the group.

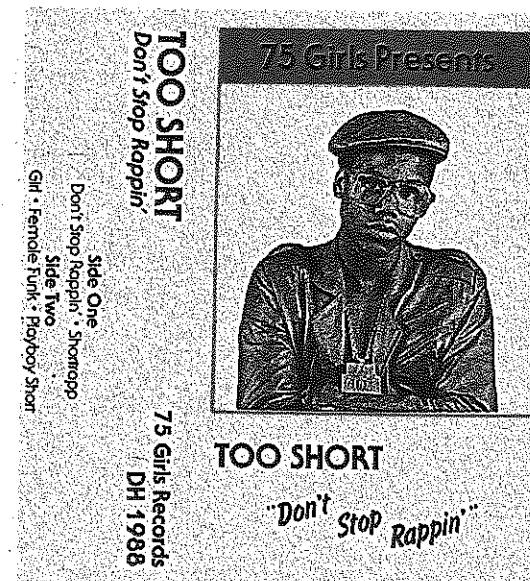
As "The Boyz-N-The Hood" began gaining traction in the streets, Eazy-E, Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, MC Ren, and DJ Yella started recording what would become *Straight Outta Compton* and Eazy-E's *Eazy-Duz-It*. For his part, Heller had meetings with several major record companies, shopping N.W.A's material to his circle of music industry friends. Executives at Capitol Records, Columbia Records, Elektra Records, and other major imprints all balked at releasing the racy subject matter.

But Eazy-E had a backup plan in J.J. Fad, the female rap trio of MC J.B., Baby D, and Sassy C. The group had a hit with the Arabian Prince-produced pop/rap song "Supersonic." Heller thought that he could land the clean-cut outfit a major record deal thanks to Dr. Dre's even more commercially viable remix. He did, with Atco Records, a subsidiary of Atlantic Records.

Released in April 1988, the Dr. Dre version of J.J. Fad's "Supersonic" was a radio hit and went gold in nine months. The trio's *Supersonic* album was released in June 1988 and sold more than five hundred thousand copies in three months, earning Ruthless Records its first breakout hit and its first major cash infusion. It was also a sign of things to come. For Eazy-E, it marked the beginning of his meteoric rise as a businessman. For Dr. Dre, it signaled his production prowess and earned him his first gold record.

But where J.J. Fad was pop-heavy and friendly, N.W.A wanted to live up to their name. "That's what we felt we were," Ice Cube said. "We were tired of shit. We weren't going to hold it in. We were going to just rap about it. It was the perfect name because it was taking control of yourself, in a way, and defining yourself."

"The Boyz-N-The Hood" helped define N.W.A by showcasing an almost detached Eazy-E, but one who



TOO \$HORT

IN THE MIDEIGHTIES, Too \$hort became a local celebrity in Oakland, California, by selling custom-made cassette tapes on the bus with partner in rhyme Freddy B. After releasing a string of popular independent singles and albums that contained cuts featuring him boasting about his rap prowess ("Don't Stop Rappin'"), bemoaning drug use ("Girl [Cocaine]"), and detailing his wild sexual adventures with women ("Freaky Tales"), Too \$hort broke through nationally once he signed to Jive Records (who also counted Whodini and Boogie Down Productions among their roster). He zeroed in on the same world as gangster rappers, but his social commentary on the world of pimps, players, and prostitutes made him distinctive.

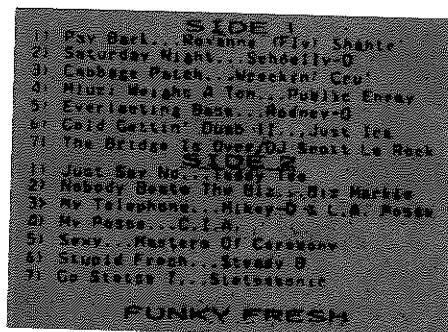
was likely a by-product of the fact that he was not originally supposed to be rapping on the song. Ice Cube had written it for New York rap group H.B.O. (Home Boys Only), but the group didn't appreciate the decidedly West Coast lyrics and left the studio without doing the song. Ice Cube was in the group C.I.A., and MC Ren hadn't yet become an official member of the crew. The lack of rappers in the studio opened a lane for Eazy-E to transform from just the brains behind N.W.A to one of its voices.

As Eazy-E's time on the mic grew, so did his comfort level and his panache. Ice Cube, on the other hand, rapped with attitude to spare from the jump. Even though it is labeled as an N.W.A song, "A Bitch Iz A Bitch" is an explicit treatise where Ice Cube rhymes solo and slams gold-digging and attitudinal women, relegating that segment of the female population to bitch status.

But Ice Cube's rancor wasn't limited to women. On the opening verse of "Dope Man," he provides a chilling third-person look into the world of the drug dealer, a heartless character who looks down on his customers, even as they supply him with the capital to make his material dreams possible.

His Uzi up yo' ass if he don't get paid / Nigga begging for credit, he's knocking out teeth

As for the dope man's girlfriend:



THE ROADIUM OPEN AIR MARKET AKA THE ROADIUM SWAP MEET

A FIFTEEN-ACRE OUTDOOR swap meet in Torrance, California, the Roadium Open Air Market is located about six miles west of downtown Compton and was a place where independent rap artists gained traction in the area by selling their music. Several gangster rappers became local celebrities in the mideighties by selling their material at the flea market. "I don't think I'd be in the music business had I not heard these mixtapes at the Roadium Swap Meet," DJ Quik said. "Some of them, I still have now. Eazy-E and Dr. Dre were putting out these mixtapes. The way they were recording it, Dr. Dre was an animal at tape recording and editing. Motherfuckas don't know. He's not to be fucked with. They're some of the best-sounding cassettes you've ever heard in your life. When I heard them and saw Compton on the address, I'd never seen that before. Whoa. That means this place matters."

Sit and cry / If the dope man strikes you / He don't give a fuck / He got two just like you

Ice Cube's commentary about a woman labeled "Strawberry" was anything but sweet.

Strawberry is the neighborhood ho / Do anything for a hit or two / Give the bitch a rock, she fuck the whole damn crew

Even though the emerging gangster rap subgenre was accused of trumpeting negativity, "Dope Man" certainly isn't a celebration of the culture. "If you smoke 'caine, you a stupid motherfucker" is how Ice Cube starts the third verse. Then, in a remarkable tag-team move, Ice Cube figuratively passes the mic to Eazy-E, the self-proclaimed "dope man," who proceeds to relay that he's got "money up to here but unemployed."

"It was easy to write 'Dope Man,'" Ice Cube said. "The shit was all around us. The eighties were the worst, what cocaine did to people. It was going like a disease from house to house to house to house. The man you respected in 1979 and '81 was washing cars for five dollars in 1985. He'd lost his house, his kids. Everybody left him. Motherfuckers were pulling furniture out his house. He'd be in the house sleeping on the floor. No carpet. He'd pulled the carpet up and sold it. This is a man you used to respect as an elder. Now, he's a crackhead. We had to say something and do something about it, which was just to tell the world what the fuck was going on."

What the world heard was striking. "I remember first hearing N.W.A with *Straight Outta Compton*," the Fat Boys' Kool Rock Ski said. "I'm like, 'Damn. You know, this is crazy.' Look at the stuff we're doing. It's like walking into frickin' Disneyland."

But the words and the feel of N.W.A's material transported listeners to a lifestyle nothing like the Happiest Place on Earth. Ice Cube and Eazy-E's words on "Dope Man" are made all the more powerful by Dr. Dre's searing production, which took its funk and edge from the Ohio Players' "Funky Worm," which is sampled throughout. Unlike the skeletal sounds of gangster rap precursors Schoolly D, Ice-T, and Boogie Down Productions, Dr. Dre's production was layered and vibrant. It had a driving musical pulse thanks to well-placed funk and soul samples from James Brown and the Staple Singers, as well as at least ten other sources, all of which blended into a virtually combustible aural assault.

Then there was "Fuck tha Police" (written as "____ Tha Police" on the album copy). It stands as N.W.A's signature song, but it almost didn't get past the idea stage.

Even though the group's music had gotten some local acclaim, the group members were still struggling. Close to completely giving up on his dream of

becoming a rap star, Ice Cube left for school in Arizona. He wrote a verse for a song called "Fuck tha Police." There was a problem, though.

"Dr. Dre didn't want to use it," Ice Cube said. "He didn't want no songs talking about the police. He said that nobody gave a fuck about that, about hearing about the police."

Viewing the song as a lost cause, Ice Cube threw his lyrics in the trash. "One of my homeboys named Phil was like, 'Hell nah,' and pulled it out the trash can," Ice Cube said. "He was like, 'Hell nah. That shit is dope. You can't throw that one away.' Back then, if Dre didn't want to do some shit, it didn't get done."

Discouraged but not defeated, Ice Cube held on to his antipolice rap. N.W.A wrapped work on Eazy-E's *Eazy-Duz-It* album before they finished *Straight Outta Compton*, and Dr. Dre told Ice Cube he needed some more material for N.W.A's project.

"So I waited until everybody was in the room and I brought up 'Fuck tha Police' again," Ice Cube said. "It just caught fire. Ren was like, 'Hell yeah. That's dope.'"

"We always wanted to say that, but nobody was talking like that," DJ Yella said. "The song was true to the ghetto. Everybody hated the police. I guess we just had the balls to say it—and got lucky with it."

The way N.W.A presented the song was almost as noteworthy as the song itself. The group took the groundbreaking step of setting up "Fuck tha Police" as a faux court case, complete with the D.O.C. portraying the bailiff, Dr. Dre handling judicial duties, and Ice Cube, MC Ren, and Eazy-E serving as prosecuting attorneys against the police department.

On the first verse of "Fuck tha Police," Ice Cube took "the stand" and proceeded to lay out his reason for his disdain for law enforcement.

Fuck the police! Comin' straight from the underground / A young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown / And not the other color, so police think / They have the authority to kill a minority

Prior to his verse, MC Ren and a police officer acted out a scenario where the rapper gets pulled over. According to the officer, the reasoning was "Cause I feel like it."

The intro to Eazy-E's verse featured police knocking on his door, executing a warrant, and refusing to announce the alleged transgressions the Ruthless Records owner had committed. Eazy-E questioned the toughness of police officers.

Without a gun and a badge, what do ya got? / A sucker in a uniform waiting to get shot / By me or another nigga / And with a gat it don't matter if he's smaller or bigger

The song concluded with the jury finding the police officer "guilty of being a redneck, white-bred, chickenshit motherfucker" and judge Dr. Dre ordering his staff to get the officer "the fuck out my face."

"Fuck tha Police" marked the first time skits were used as a driving portion of the narrative of a song, giving N.W.A's words a cinematic feel. Listeners were exposed to more than just lyrics and music. The lines were fully executed events, commercials of a sort.

"When we were making records, the records were a whole thing," the D.O.C. said. "The songs were individual, but as a piece of art, everything went together. We made the record so that you could put it on and play the thing all the way through, so the commercials were just something that took you from one place to the next place with something that made you laugh, made you have fun, and [made you enjoy] the listening experience."

"We wanted to make it three-dimensional," Ice Cube said. "Not just a record, but a whole experience."

Eazy-E, though, didn't want controversy to be N.W.A's only calling card. He had just tasted success with J.J. Fad and wanted to hedge his bets on N.W.A's commercial prospects. Hence the profanity-free "Express Yourself" and the album-closing "Something 2 Dance 2," a song featuring Arabian Prince that sounds more like a World Class Wreckin' Cru cut than N.W.A material.

"I hated it," said Ice Cube, who does not appear on "Something 2 Dance 2." "I was like, 'This shit don't even match.'"

ODD MAN OUT: ARABIAN PRINCE

The son of prolific Holloway House writer Joseph "Skippy" Nazel Jr., Arabian Prince produced the original version of Ruthless Records' first hit: J.J. Fad's "Supersonic." The Compton electro rapper-producer was also a member of N.W.A and appeared on the group's "Panic Zone" single in 1987, as well as on the cover of N.W.A's *Straight Outta Compton* album and the collection's "Something 2 Dance 2." By the time *Straight Outta Compton* was released, Arabian Prince had left N.W.A over creative differences and returned to his dance-electro roots. A party record in the midst of ultragangster material, "Something 2 Dance 2" was removed from later pressings of *Straight Outta Compton*.



Arabian Prince, who appears on the cover of *Straight Outta Compton* yet only raps on "Something 2 Dance 2," left the group over creative differences before the album was released. Like Dr. Dre's World Class Wreckin' Cru bandmate Alonzo Williams, Arabian Prince neither agreed with nor approved of N.W.A.'s ultraviolent and ribald material.

"It's like we opened up one door and closed the other one," DJ Yella said. "We were going from one era to another one."

Indeed, the music N.W.A was making was more primal than Little Richard's squeal, more provocative than Elvis's suggestive hips, more violent than Johnny Cash's shooting a man just to watch him die, and more timely than the overtly sexualized and fantasy-based R&B and electro music of the eighties. N.W.A's entrance came with profanity-laced assaults; sex in the roughest, most descriptive manner possible; and violence executed with rage and without remorse. Eazy-E, Ice Cube, MC Ren, Dr. Dre, and DJ Yella presented themselves as a gang on the record and gave listeners little reason to believe they weren't one off the record.

But being gangster rappers wasn't something N.W.A sought out. "It was called reality rap before gangster rap," Ice Cube said. "That's what N.W.A is, reality rap."

Regardless of how they were labeled, one of N.W.A's objectives was to show that their Los Angeles experience was far different from the one presented by the glamour of Hollywood, Randy Newman's 1983 song "I Love L.A.," and the successful run the city had with the 1984 Summer Olympics. Eazy-E, in particular, was focused on putting his city on the map. "Nobody knew nothing about Compton, really—not unless you lived here," Ice Cube said. "We heard everybody putting their cities on the map—South Bronx, Brooklyn—so he [Eazy-E] felt compelled to put Compton down the same way."

Eazy-E's plan worked. "Eazy-E taught us we mattered," platinum rapper-producer and Compton, California, native DJ Quik said. "Dr. Dre nailed it home. Ice Cube wrote the soundtrack to our life. It was like we really didn't have to talk. We could just play an N.W.A record. It said every mood you were in."

After defecting from music compilation label K-Tel, white Canadian music

"It's like we opened up one door and closed the other one. We were going from one era to another one."

DJ YELLA

executives Bryan Turner and Mark Cerami launched Priority Records, which was distributed by industry juggernaut EMI. The company was flush with cash after the success of the California Raisins, a fictional R&B group presented as raisins that had sold more than one million copies thanks to their cover of Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It Through the Grapevine." Turner and Cerami also knew the power of rap through their background at K-Tel, which had released several successful rap compilations. Priority Records agreed to distribute N.W.A's and Eazy-E's releases. In a move that would later prove problematic for Eazy-E, he did not initially have the members of N.W.A sign as solo artists to Ruthless Records.

In a revolutionary agreement, Ruthless Records' contract with Priority Records did not make Ruthless and their acts exclusive to Priority, as was typically the case whenever a smaller label signed a deal with a larger company. Indeed, the way the contract was set up, the other acts on Ruthless Records (Michelle, the D.O.C., Above the Law) were free to sign with other labels. Thus, once N.W.A's and Eazy-E's material took off, the freedom afforded to Ruthless by Priority was a key component to the development of Ruthless's success as a business. Ruthless Records was not tied to one company and could use its leverage to get better deals from labels competing for its acts.

In 1988, the fledgling Priority Records was about the lowest-tier label Heller could go to. But Priority had a much larger reach than Macola thanks to its national distribution deal with industry powerhouse EMI. That muscle helped get Ruthless Records releases in record stores throughout the country and its artists' names

A GANGSTER'S STORY

ALTHOUGH N.W.A'S *STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON* garners most of the attention, Eazy-E's *Eazy-Duz-It* was also a landmark gangster rap release. The 1988 album includes the sensational remix of the seminal "Boyz-N-The Hood," as well as "We Want Eazy," and "Eazy-Er Said Than Dunn," both of which were mainstays on *Yo! MTV Raps* and helped establish Eazy-E as both the face of N.W.A and of gangster rap.

"Eazy was the first person on a whole record who talked the way people I looked up to talked," says gangster rapper Glasses Malone, who grew up in Watts, California. "It was all of the private intel he was making public. He was the first person to me using the word bitch so freely, so openly. I was hearing that every day. It was like he became a reflection of everything I saw every day at the time, and that was the first time I ever saw it from somebody. It was from somebody who you could see around the city, like a guy that's really from around there."

Yet the firestorm that *Straight Outta Compton* cut "Fuck Tha Police" generated moved the attention, if not sales (*Eazy-Duz-It* sold more than 1 million copies its first seven months in stores), away from *Eazy-Duz-It*. Nonetheless, Glasses Malone believes that Eazy-E was the embodiment of what people loved about N.W.A and its music.

"*Straight Outta Compton* is Eazy-E," Glasses Malone said. "It's more Eazy-E than anybody else. Everybody else was more rapping and stuff, and Dr. Dre as a producer. Eazy-E actually is *Straight Outta Compton*. *Eazy-Duz-It* is like the raw, pure version of *Straight Outta Compton* straight out of Eazy-E's mouth. I don't really think it got its just due."

MACOLA RECORDS

MACOLA RECORDS GAVE West Coast gangster rap its launching pad in the mideighties. The Hollywood-based independent label, manufacturer, and distributor released early recordings from Ice-T, King Tee, World Class Wreckin' Cru, C.I.A., Eazy-E, N.W.A, J.J. Fad, Arabian Prince, the Unknown DJ, Laylaw, Cli-N-Tel, and the D.O.C.'s the Fila Fresh Crew, among others.

*Macola
Record Co.*

in the rap media. What really generated N.W.A.'s firestorm, though, was an unintended ally: the United States government, specifically the FBI.

In August 1989, Milt Ahlerich, assistant director of the FBI Office of Public Affairs, sent Priority Records a letter voicing the organization's displeasure with "Fuck tha Police," though the letter does not mention it by name. "Advocating violence and assault is wrong, and we in the law enforcement community take exceptions to such action," the letter says, per the *Los Angeles Times*. "Recordings such as the one from N.W.A are both discouraging and degrading to these brave, dedicated officers."

Pat Charbonnet, N.W.A.'s publicist at the time, told the *Los Angeles Times* that the letter "makes valid everything [the rap group] said on the record. Their life is a lifetime of hassle and it never stopped being that way."

Danny Goldberg, then chairman of the Southern California affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), argued in October 1989 that the letter would, in fact, further the belief that the government remained at odds with America's lower-class citizens.

"It reinforces the notion among minorities that the government is against them," Goldberg said. "[N.W.A] is a positive role model about how you can get out of poverty, and then the FBI writes them a letter. The result is to add to the feelings of alienation and separation from society, and those are the things that give rise to violence. . . . Rap is one of the most positive role models, a positive way for poor people using their energies, making art and poetry out of their social dilemma. They should be applauded by the police."

On the contrary, police in several cities throughout the United States tried to prevent N.W.A from performing, fearing that the group would encourage their fan base to be violent toward police officers.

"I think Eazy took the attitude of somebody like Donald Trump," the D.O.C. said. "I mean that guy's said some of the most ridiculous shit in the world, right, some of the most inflammatory shit in the world. He doesn't give a fuck about anybody and talks shit to you to your face: 'Suck my dick. You can't get in my country. Kiss my ass.' He said all of this shit and he got [elected] fuckin' president. The [Republican strategist] Roger Stone school says, 'If you're mad with me, you're upset with me, you're talking shit, arguing with me, I've already won the game.' I think Eazy was sort of in that school."

Up to this point, N.W.A was an independent rap group that was getting little radio play outside of Los Angeles AM rap station KDAY and scant coverage in the mainstream media. Then the FBI wrote them a letter. It generated national publicity for them. It also gave the group an identity as being infamous.

"That song right there separates us because that's something everybody wanted to say, much more than *bitch, hoe, pussy*, and all the other nasty words on there," Ice Cube said. "That phrase right there is something the whole world had been wanting to say."

Having the excitement drummed up in the press was one thing. More than that, N.W.A needed a vehicle to help spread their message. They found an unlikely partner in a music channel that had heretofore essentially ignored black music.