Getting Started

Before you read this selection, think about the term "gangsta rap". How do you define this genre? Which artists do you think of? What do you know about the history of gangsta rap?

People are usually the product of where they come from. The bonds that you made, the codes that were there, all have an influence on you later in life. You can reject them. You can say "Okay, those codes don't exist for me, because I'm not of that world anymore." But the reason for those codes—why people live that way—are very strong lessons. The most important reason is survival. It comes down to that. That struggle of the human form, the corporal, the flesh, to survive—anything to survive. I think those things you carry with you the rest of your life.

Martin Scorsese, Rolling Stone, 1990

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement black middle-class families, and many working-class families, finally had the freedom to live wherever they could afford. Of course racism still kept them out of certain areas, but a lot of people up and down the economic ladder got enough capital—and guts—to finally get out of the old, embattled neighborhoods. Not just doctors and lawyers moved out of these black neighborhoods. So did bus drivers, teachers, and bureaucrats with new gigs in municipal governments. Ironically, the enhanced mobility of black wage earners left the old neighborhoods wide open to increased crime, which led to an increase in white flight. White merchants, vilified as exploiters by many of their African-American customers, were either burned out by urban riots or chased out by crime.

And the majority of that crime was instigated by drugs. As was tellingly illustrated by Allen and Albert Hughes in Dead Presidents, the change happened with a lethal quickness. In their film, a black GI leaves for Vietnam from a tough, yet still hopeful neighborhood and returns to a meaner, more desperate and
heroin-saturated ghetto. In fact, GIs contributed to this tragic change both as victims and predators.

In 1971, the U.S. Army estimated that 10 percent of our soldiers used heroin while in 'Nam and that 5 percent were hardcore junkies. Some black GIs, returning home to an uncertain future, brought heroin back with them as a hedge against unemployment. In so doing they participated in inaugurating a new wave of black criminal entrepreneurship—a street-corner response to President Nixon’s rhetoric encouraging black capitalism in lieu of government aid.

The heroin invasion, while partially orchestrated by the Mafia and other established crime syndicates, brought new forces into American crime (Asian and South American traffickers) and empowered a new, vicious kind of black gangster. Heroin emboldened the black criminal class, which had been clustered in numbers running, prostitution, fencing, and robbery, to expand and become more predatory.

Prior to heroin’s mass marketing in the late ‘60s, the prototypical black criminal was the numbers runner, a creature of the northern ghettos with a pedigree that went back to the ‘30s. Numbers runners were viewed as a necessary evil who, in the best-case scenario, acted as community bankers, processing daily investments from their customers. Less romantically, numbers runners were also unreliable liars who skimmed profits from winners and conveniently disappeared when someone hit big, though too much inconsistency in payment endangered his or her livelihood (and life). As drug dealers would later, the numbers runners profited off the community’s poorest. They sold dreams and, in dribs and drabs, drained money out of black America.

Of course running numbers wasn’t selling an inherently lethal product—just elusive big money dreams, the same as horse racing and other games of chance. Numbers running employed people in a network of criminal activity that was condoned by the community and the police because it provided hope and, on occasion, large sums of money to its customers. Numbers were, in fact, part of the glue that held together many poor African-American neighborhoods, a shared enthusiasm that sustained daily life at the same time it undercut it.

Alongside the numbers runner in the pantheon of preheroin black criminality were the pimp and the wino. While obviously an exploiter of women and male sexual desire, the pimp has been, in the mind of many men and more women than would admit it, a figure of fascination, a certain awe, and suppressed respect. At the core of this interest is the pimp’s ability to control others. Any man who can, through business savvy, sexual prowess, understanding of human psychology, and yes, violence, get others to perform the most intimate sexual acts and give him the money titillates many at some undeniably base level.

In a warped and unhealthy way the pimp’s ability to control his environment (i.e., his stable of women) has always been viewed as a rare example of black male authority over his domain. Despite decades of moral censure from church leaders and those incensed by his exploitation of women, the pimp endures as an antihero among young black males. The pimp’s garb, slang, and persona influences the culture to this day and shows no signs of abating.

In contrast to the potent, romanticized pimp, the wino was the precursor to the heroin addict as the embodiment of urban tragedy. Heroin junkies weren’t new to the black community in the ‘60s. It’s just that, in the rarified world of jazz and music, they were more isolated, while the victims of cheap wine and alcohol had haunted street corners since African-Americans moved North. The sale of Ripple, Wild Irish Rose, and other juice-flavored poisons in poor and black neighborhoods foreshadowed the target marketing of malt liquor in the ‘80s and ‘90s.

Through black pop culture of the ‘60s and ‘70s one can experience the evolution in black criminal culture. In Richard Pryor’s classic routine “The Wino and the Junkie,” from his That Nigger’s Crazy album, the great comedian depicts the wino as a city-living country wit and the junkie as a wasted young urban zombie. The split is significant in that Pryor, an artist/cocaine addict himself, provided nuance to the difference between addiction to heroin and alcohol and how it would eventually affect the entire black community.

The Holloway House novels of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines, published throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s, memorably documented the transition in black crime from pimping, numbers running, and grifting to selling smack. Slim (Robert Beck), a fair-skinned con man who often passed for white, wrote lovingly of country-bred hustlers who traveled to the big cities employing various psychological gambits to get women to prostitute themselves (as in Pimp: The Story of My Life) and to swindle men out of their hard-earned cash (as in Trick Baby). Goines, who succeeded Slim as essential black barbershop reading, was a longtime heroin addict gunned down in 1974, along with his wife, apparently while at his typewriter. During his tortured thirty-nine years on earth, Goines ground out sixteen novels about lost, mentally diseased people existing in squalid conditions, in blunt, brutal prose that, early in his career, possessed the ugly poetry of bracing pulp fiction.
In the real world, African-American heroin empires grew during the '70s around the country: in Chicago under the rule of the violent El Rukins gang; in the District of Columbia, run by Rayfield Edmonds, Sr.; in New York City, first by Frank Matthews and later by "Mr. Untouchable"—Leroy "Nicky" Barnes. They all established large distribution networks and, in the case of Barnes, made international contacts for importation that superseded traditional white ethnic control. Just as many blaxploitation movie scenarios revolved around struggles to control crime in black neighborhoods, these real-life black kingpins found themselves in high-pitched short-term battles with the fading Italian and Irish syndicates—in the long run new forces would come to replace the Italians. The long stable hierarchy of American crime crumbled when new drugs, such as angel dust and cocaine, became popular in the streets.

Heroin's growth as a mass market commodity ended the drug's romantic association with black musicians. The idea of Charlie Parker and other musicians as "beautiful losers" rather than as what they were—gifted people with a debilitating addiction—largely collapsed as the squalid junkie lifestyle became clear on America's streets. There was little inspiration in grown men begging for quarters, stealing car radios, and sleeping curled up in doorways.

Heroin couldn't have run wild in the streets without widespread police and political corruption aiding its dissemination. Hand in hand with this moral failure, the federal government under President Nixon cut back on Democratic antipoverty programs and systematically ignored the economic development pleas of America's urbanites, whose jobs were fleeing to the suburbs.

There are all kinds of conspiracy theories about why heroin flowed so intensely into black neighborhoods. There is evidence that the CIA was involved in the Asian "golden triangle," purchasing and helping distribute heroin as a way to fund assassinations and other covert operations. This fact has evolved into the theory that heroin was imported into black communities by government forces (including the virulent, racist Federal Bureau of Investigation honcho J. Edgar Hoover) to undermine the civil rights movement. This theory of government conspiracy provided the premise to Melvin Yan Peebles's screenplay for son Mario's 1995 film Panther. Sure, there's an edge of paranoia there, but the more you learn about the counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) that the FBI and Justice Department targeted at black leaders, the easier it is to give these theories some credence.

It is a fact that in the '70s agent provocateurs infiltrated Black Panther chapters around the nation, often rising to positions of authority where they helped sabotage an already high-strung organization. The police shooting of Chicago's Fred Hampton in 1969, instigated by a government informer in that Panther chapter, is just one of many documented episodes of internal espionage aimed at the period's black activists.

In August 1996, the San Jose Mercury News, a California daily, ran a series called "Dark Alliance" that connected the CIA with the importation of crack into Southern California during the '80s. African-American activists like Dick Gregory and Congresswoman Maxine Waters of South Central Los Angeles embraced the report and stuck by its conclusions even after the CIA aggressively debunked the story and the Mercury News itself finally backed off most of its original conclusions.

African-American belief in government duplicity toward them is deep-seated and even sometimes overly paranoid, yet there is an evil history that gives these conspiracies real credibility. From the Tuskegee syphilis experiment that poisoned the bodies of poor Alabama men with a venereal disease for over forty years at U.S. expense to the FBI putting microphones under Dr. Martin Luther King's bed to record his sex life and COINTELPRO's subversion of black radical organizing, elements of this country's law enforcement branches have been performing nefarious deeds on its African-American citizens for decades. While the crack-CIA connection seems a dead end now, who knows what information will come to light in the next century?

Whether a covert government conspiracy or just the product of everyday law-enforcement corruption and neglect, the growth of the urban drug culture stifled the civil rights movement around the country. It wore down white goodwill toward blacks' noble striving, particularly among big-city Jews and liberals. By the early '70s it was crime, not equality, that became the focus of discussion between blacks and Jews, ultimately driving a wedge between these longtime allies that may never be smoothed over.

Heroin use declined in the early '80s due to a slackening of the supply, but the illegal drug industry, which has proven to be one of the most adaptable enterprises in our country, aimed a new product line at the nation's drug aficionados—angel dust aka PCP (phencyclidine). This manmade psychoactive drug produces hallucinations that can cause severe psychological trauma. Usually sprinkled on a regular or marijuana cigarette, angel dust can drive its users to uncontrollable violent reactions. Someone
“dusty” is always dangerous, because you never know what the next puff can lead to. Local news broadcasts of the early ’80s regularly led off the six o’clock news with footage of cops and hospital personnel struggling to subdue someone “beaming up to Scotty.” Angel dust is, in effect, a lethal form of ghetto LSD, which many kids experimented with to enter a vibrant, animated dream world. In my experience, angel dust was particularly popular with people with rich fantasy lives who ignored the danger in exchange for high-intensity pleasure. I remember one dusty homie was always seeing space ships hovering over Harlem.

During the early days of hip hop, angel dust was the drug of choice at parties. It was cheap, fast, and readily available. Many rap stars and their fans attended hip hop events extremely dusty and, as a result, angel dust became a creative stimulant in hip hop culture. But while angel dust ruled the streets, a more potent form of cocaine was quietly trickling down from the Wall Street elite.

CRACK

In the “Superfly” ’70s, coke was sniffed or snorted (choose your verb) in powder form from tabletops, album covers, and parts of other folks’ bodies. In inner-city neighborhoods, coke users wishing to socialize with those of similar appetites gathered at after-hours clubs to separate themselves from marijuana smokers and heroin junkies. Back in 1979, I interviewed a dealer who said that “coke sniffers were Kings and Queens and heads of state”—as opposed to “the low rent people” he sold marijuana to.

By the early ’80s, cocaine consumption turned toward smoking freebase, which is cocaine at its basic alkaloid level. Like many folks, I’d never heard of freebasin until Richard Pryor ran in a fiery ball out of his California home on June 9, 1980. Coke had always been an expensive drug and this “cooking” to create a smokable version just seemed another occupation of the bored rich.

In freebasin, the cocaine is boiled in water and the residue is placed in cold water where it forms “base” or “freebase.” The chipped-off pieces are called “crack” because it often makes a crackling sound as it burns. The popularity of this form of cocaine coincided with a dramatic increase in the growth of coca leaves in Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia that drove down the price of manufactured cocaine.

According to sociologist Terry Williams’s insightful 1992 book about the crack lifestyle, Crackhouse: Notes from the End of the Line, the price dropped from $50,000 a kilo in 1980 to $35,000 in 1984 to $12,000 in 1992. Crack took cocaine away from high rollers and put it within reach of poorer addicts. For as little as $2, crack became available in plastic vials with red, blue, yellow, or green caps that denoted a particular dealer’s territory or a particular dealer’s product line. Often dealers named their brands after some pop culture artifact such as the movie Lethal Weapon or the band P-Funk.

The first references to mass market freebase came in two rap records—“White Lines” by Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, featuring Melle Mel, in 1983 and “Batterram” by Teddy Tee in 1985, which described a mini-tank the LAPD was using to break “rock houses.” Soon the American media landscape would be littered with references to, and discussions of, crack. From those initial street reports, hip hop would chronicle, celebrate, and be blamed for the next level of drug culture development.

The crack industry became able employers of teenagers, filling the economic vacuum created by the ongoing loss of working-class jobs to the suburbs and then to poor Third World countries. Teenagers and adolescents were zealously recruited to provide the unskilled labor needed for manufacturing, packaging, and selling illegal drugs. By 1992 it was estimated that as many as 150,000 people were employed in New York City’s drug trade. Similarly large numbers could be found in most major cities. MC Guru was not joking when he termed dealing “a daily operation,” since the financial life of significant portions of the American economy suddenly became driven not by the stock market but by the crack industry.

Drug addiction has always been an equal opportunity exploiter. It strikes old, rich, white, and black. Yet there was something profoundly disheartening about crack’s impact on young women. Williams estimated that 40 percent of all crackhouse denizens were female. It was maddening to see how many young mothers abandoned their children in pursuit of another hit. Often these women were forced to give sexual favors to support their dependencies.

During the eight years of Reagan’s presidency, the ripple effect of crack flowed through all the social service agencies of our country—welfare, child care, Medicaid, you name the area of concern and cracks impact could be felt in it. At Family Court on any given day you’d see grandmothers struggling to hold families together by taking custody of their neglected or abandoned grandchildren. It was a tragedy that robbed grandparents of their rightful rest, strained their meager financial resources, and shortened their lives. In this multigenerational chaos few could raise their head above water or plan intelligently for the future.

For those who felt the fallout from crack’s addictive power—the children of crackheads, their immediate families, friends, and neighbors—hope became a very hollow word. The world became
defined by the 'hood, the block, or the corner where the search for drugs or their addicted loved one went on every day. As the '80s rolled on, the physical and moral decay begun by heroin was accelerated by angel dust and then the McDonaldization of crack.

As a consequence for many, materialism replaced spirituality as the definer of life's worth. An appreciation for life's intangible pleasures, like child rearing and romantic love, took a beating in places where children became disposable and sex was commodified. The go-go capitalism of Reagan's America (and its corporate greed) flowed down to the streets stripped of its jingoistic patriotism and fake piety. The unfettered free market of crack generated millions and stoked a voracious appetite for "goods," not good.

CRACK UP

In my neighborhood you were either in a gang or a group—most were in both.

Smokey Robinson, 1997

Gangsta rap (or reality rap or whatever descriptive phrase you like) is a direct by-product of the crack explosion. Unless you grasp that connection nothing else that happened in hip hop's journey to national scapegoat will make sense. This is not a chicken-or-the-egg riddle—first came crack rocks, then gangsta rap.

Because the intense high of crack fades quickly, crack turned ordinary drug dealers into kingpins. After shooting up or snorting heroin, an addict resides in dreamland for hours; a crack addict experiences a brief, incredible rush, then five minutes later desires another rock. Crack created a fast-food economy of quick product turnover. Because it was so addictive and profitable, competition within impromptu urban enterprise zones (i.e., urban street corners) grew fierce. With the money crack generated from its increasingly ghostly clientele, bigger and more lethal guns filled our cities. Entering the '80s, the Saturday Night Special, a .45 caliber automatic, had long been America's death inducer of choice; by the end of the decade a medley of higher caliber weapons (the Israeli Uzi and Desert Eagle, the Austrian Glock, even the good old American Mossburg 12-gauge shotgun) pushed murder totals in Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles; Detroit; Gary, Indiana; and scores of other cities to record levels.

As dealers used these guns indiscriminately, residents in the drug-ravaged communities armed themselves as well, seeking protection from dealers and crackheads, and the climate of immorality they represented. Police impotence in cleaning neighborhoods of drug trafficking and our government's failure in drug interdiction (or complicity in the trade) produced cynicism and alienation in this nation that made Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign a joke and left her husband's "Morning in America" rife with gunsmoke from the night before.

Gangsta rap first appeared in the mid-'80s. It exploded at the end of that decade and has leveled off—just like crack use—in the '90s. The majority of this subgenre's sales are made in the suburbs. A lot of this has to do with the rebel credentials of hard rappers with teenage kids... and with the true nature of the contemporary teenage suburban experience.

Suburban kids—no longer just stereotypically white, but black, Asian, and Hispanic—have, since the '60s, always known a lot more about drugs than civic leaders have ever acknowledged. (Although there aren't as many drive-bys in suburban counties, they do indeed happen. Drug dealers don't necessarily all congregate on green lawns, but they have never met a mall they didn't love.) The dirty little secret of mainstream America is that kids of every age, particularly in high school and junior high, have access to a medley of controlled substances. The romance of the outlaw mystique of drugs and dealing is not foreign to young people—another reason why gangsta records, supposedly so distant from the white teen experience, are in fact quite familiar. Even the urban context of the records is not as mysterious or exotic, as commentators assert, since many suburban dealers and addicts use urban 'hoods as drive-through windows.

Another consequence of the crack plague was an evil increase in the numbers of incarcerated black males. In February 1990 a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization, the Sentencing Project, issued a frightening report titled Young Black Men and the Criminal Justice System: A Growing National Problem. The report stated that one in four African-American males between twenty and twenty-nine—610,000 men in total—was either behind bars or on probation. In comparison, only 436,000 were enrolled in higher education.

The reasons for this number were legion—the crack trade, the aggressive sentencing for low-level drug offenses such as possession, the eroded economic base for urban America, a profound sense of hopelessness, ineffective school systems. The social repercussions, however, were sometimes less obvious. With so many young men in jail or monitored by law enforcement, most African-Americans had someone in their family or a friend involved with the justice system, both as perpetrator and victim. It is not surprising then that narratives dealing with crime and its
More profoundly, the mentality of black culture was deeply affected. The kind of dispassionate view of violence and overall social alienation that incarceration fosters was spread by prisoners and infected the rest of the community. Jail became not a cruel punishment but a rite of passage for many that helped define one’s entry into manhood. And what being a man meant could be perversely shaped by imprisonment. For many young men, their sexual and romantic dealings were forever altered by the sexual activity that goes on behind bars.

While homosexuality is widely condemned in the black community, the committing of homosexual acts behind bars is rarely commented on. Because they often occur through rape or psychological coercion they are not viewed as acts of sexual orientation but as manifestations of control and domination, both reflections consistent with a “gangsta mental” or gangster mentality. If sex is taken, from this viewpoint, it is not an act of love but power. Whatever the justification, it suggests that there’s a homoerotic quality to this culture’s intense male bonding. As an example of how values shaped by prison influence behavior outside it, sex becomes about power, not affection. You bond with other men, not simply out of shared interest and friendship, but as protector and to gain predator power. For some men, in and out of jail since adolescence, jail begins to supersede the presence of all other environments.

Suspicion of women, loyalty to the crew, adoption of a stonelface in confronting the world, hatred of authority—all major themes of gangsta rap—owe their presence in lyrics and impact on audiences to the large number of African-American men incarcerated in the ’90s.

CRIMINAL MINDED

Whenever people rail about the evils of gangsta rap, my mind floats back to a particular record and an interview that never happened.

In 1985, New York’s KISS-FM had a Friday night rap show, and of course, hip hop records that talk of jail culture—have a special appeal. But as manifestations of control and domination, both reflections consistent with a “gangsta mental” or gangster mentality. If sex is taken, from this viewpoint, it is not an act of love but power. Whatever the justification, it suggests that there’s a homoerotic quality to this culture’s intense male bonding. As an example of how values shaped by prison influence behavior outside it, sex becomes about power, not affection. You bond with other men, not simply out of shared interest and friendship, but as protector and to gain predator power. For some men, in and out of jail since adolescence, jail begins to supersede the presence of all other environments.

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In 1985, New York’s KISS-FM had a Friday night rap show, and I’d either write with it on in the background or lie in bed listening. However, every week there was one record that stubbornly refused to be background music. Whenever the station played Schoolly D’s “PSK—What Does It Mean?” the mood of my night changed. A first-person narrative about being a vicious stick-up kid and a member of PSK (Parkside Killers) in Philadelphia, it wasn’t just Schoolly D’s words that got me. His cold-blooded delivery and the bracing, taunting track always chilled me. The intensity of my reaction to “PSK” has been matched by only two other listening experiences: hearing Robert Johnson’s devilish Delta blues for the first time and experiencing Tricky’s dense pre-millennium dread at a New York concert in 1997.

Though as an artist Schoolly D is not on the same level as the legendary Johnson or the innovative trip-hop pioneer Tricky, the Philly homeboy channeled something tortured and warped when he laid down “PSK.” When I hear people talk of being repulsed by gangsta rap’s cartoonish brutality I understand it by invoking the unease “PSK” induced in me. Back in that more innocent age, Schoolly D’s nonjudgmental attitude toward violence (as opposed to the cautionary tone of “The Message”) was unusual and even shocking.

My second early gangsta memory involves my sole encounter with Boogie Down Production’s cofounder Scott LaRock (Scott Sterling). It was backstage at Madison Square Garden during a huge, arena-sized rap show. The flavors of mid-’80s black pop culture were in effect: the teen star of America’s then number-one sitcom, The Cosby Show’s Malcolm-Jamal Warner, sat in the wings watching LL Cool J rock the crowd; Mike Tyson, the then heavyweight champ from my native Brownsville and unrepentant bully, hit a girl with his forearm as he passed her and chuckled. A moment later I was introduced to LaRock, who had just emerged as one of the hottest producer-entrepreneurs in hip hop. As part of Boogie Down Productions, LaRock had helped mastermind the brilliant Criminal Minded. Fronted by the brutal rhymes and oddly whimsical vocals of ex-homeless teen KRS-One (Kris Parker), this was the first album-length exploration of the crack-fueled criminality of Reagan’s America.

Criminal Minded had been released in 1987 on the black-owned, Bronx-based B-Boy Records, which KRS-One took every opportunity he had in the press to trash. B-Boy controlled Boogie Down Productions for only one album. As a result, everybody in the business was after BDP, but Jive’s Barry Weiss and Ann Carli closed the deal. I told LaRock I wanted an interview for Billboard. He took my notepad and wrote down his name and number, I said I’d call next week. That weekend on August 26, 1987, LaRock was murdered in the kind of gun-related stupidity we now take for granted.

Before he began his hip hop career, LaRock had earned his keep as a counselor at homeless shelters, which is how he’d
hooked up with Parker. One of the young men in the BDP collective was D-Nice (Derrick Jones), a shy, attractive, and gifted fifteen-year-old DJ being mentored by Parker and LaRock. D-Nice’s boyish good looks had attracted the unwanted attention of a drug dealer’s girlfriend in the Bronx and her unamused boyfriend threatened Derrick with harm. On the Saturday afternoon after the Garden concert, LaRock, D-Nice, and a couple of BDP members drove to the dealer’s hood hoping to squash the beef. Apparently the dealer or some of his associates knew BDP were coming. Aware of Criminal Minded’s violent content, perhaps they anticipated trouble, but LaRock was actually seeking a sit-down. As the Jeep containing BDP members arrived on the dealer’s street, a shot rang out and the bullet that entered the vehicle struck Scott LaRock dead. As with so much urban violence, no one was ever indicted for the murder.

The question of whether BDP’s rep played any part in this pre-emptive strike will likely never be answered, but whenever someone equates rap and gangsterism LaRock’s death comes back to me. Looking back at his shooting, it seems a harbinger of a future where reality and rhyme often would tragically intersect, LaRock was not a violent man. He, in fact, spent much of his life trying to mediate conflicts in shelters where hopelessness ruled. The day he died he was on a peace mission for a friend. Yet with Criminal Minded, LaRock, as a musician and entertainer, had already tapped into the furiously self-destructive materialism of his age.

It is the irony of LaRock’s life and death that makes me question simplistic explanations of gangsta rap. Not all rappers who write violent lyrics have lived the words. Most exercise the same artistic license to write violent tales as do the makers of Hollywood flicks. A few of those who do write violent lyrics have lived the tales or have friends who have. Within any collection of rap songs—either by those making it up or those who have lived it—a wide range of narrative strategies are employed. Many violent rhymes are just cartoons, with images as grounded in reality as the Road Runner. The outrageous words of Eazy-E and Kool G Rap fit this category. Some are cautionary tales that relate the dangers inherent to street life—Melle Mel and Duke Bootie’s words in “The Message” are the prototype. Some are first-person narratives told with an objective, almost cinematic eye, by masters of the style like Ice Cube and KRS-One. Some end with the narrator in bold, bloody triumph, techniques both Scarface and Ice-T employ well. A bold few end with the narrator dead and work as stories told from the grave, an approach both Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. favored in sadly prophetic recordings.

Some violent rhymes are poetically rendered and novelistically well observed, as in the more nuanced work of Chuck D, Rakim, and Nas. Too Short and Luther Campbell can, in contrast, be as crude as the bathroom humor of Jim Carrey’s Dumb & Dumber. Some are morally complicated by the narrator’s possible insanity, which is a specialty of Houston’s Scarface. Some are so empty and rote that only the most reactionary listeners would think they could incite anything beyond contempt. My point is that most MCs who’ve been categorized as gangsta rappers are judged thoughtlessly without any understanding of the genuine stylistic differences between them.

Besides, what is gangsta rap anyway? Listen to any of N.W.A.’s albums, as well as Eazy-E’s solo efforts, Dr. Dre’s The Chronic and Snoop Doggy Dogg’s Doggystyle. In their celebration of gatts, hoes, gleeful nihilism, and crack as the center of their economic universe, these albums darkly display everything people fear about gangsta rap. But outside of this collection of records—most of them with brilliantly modulated vocals supervised by Dr. Dre—I’d be hard-pressed to agree to label any other major rap star a gangsta rapper. For example, the work of Ice Cube (except for his insipid West Coast Connection project) and Scarface is way too diverse and eclectic to fit a simplistic mass media stereotype.

The martyrs of ’90s hip-hop—Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace)—were quickly tagged gangsta rappers after their demise, though crack and crime were not their only topics. A lot of drivel has been written about these two dead young black men. Heroes for a generation. Victims of their violent recordings. Martyrs. Villains. Whatever. For a moment let’s just discuss them as artists. If, over twenty years after it evolved out of the Bronx, hip hop is an art form, then these men built profoundly on that foundation. Far from being simple oppositional figures in an East Coast–West Coast soap opera, Pac and Biggie complemented each other, though outwardly they seem mismatched.

Biggie was round and spoke in a thoughtful Brooklyn-meets-the-Caribbean drawl he derived from his articulate mother, a Jamaican-born schoolteacher. Tupac was taut and spoke with an activist’s urgency and an actor’s sense of drama, a by-product of his mother’s militant background and his theatrical training in high school. Biggie covered himself in layers of expensive clothing and the regal air that led him to be dubbed the “King of New York” after the ’90s gangsta film. Tupac always seemed to have his shirt off, better to expose his six-pack abdominals, wiry body, and the words “Thug 4 Life” tattooed across his belly.
But inside, both young men possessed lyrical dexterity, a writer's strong point of view, and a bitter, street-hardened sense of irony. Ultimately, Tupac and Biggie, like most of the controversial and best rappers who came after Public Enemy's political spiels, were both poets of negation, a stance that always upsets official cultural gatekeepers and God-fearing folks within black America. African-Americans have always been conflicted by art that explores the psychologically complex, even evil aspects of their existence, feeling it plays into the agenda of white oppression. On a very direct, obvious level they have a point. Black people saying bad things about themselves can serve to reinforce racist attitudes among non-blacks.

Yet, without a doubt, political and social conditions must not, cannot, and will not circumscribe the vision of true artists. Tupac and Biggie were artists who looked at the worst things in their world and reveled in describing their meanest dreams and grossest nightmares. They embraced the evil of crack America and articulated it with style—but highlighting is not the same as celebrating. The celebrated work of director Martin Scorsese parallels this artistic impulse. His violent masterworks—Mean Streets, Raging Bull, and GoodFellas—are undeniably artful yet morally twisted and deeply troubling in what they depict about the Italian-American soul in particular and the human capacity for violence in general—yet no one accuses him of being a self-glorying predator.

Scorsese is considered, perhaps, the greatest living American filmmaker; Tupac and Biggie were labeled gangsta rappers in their obituaries. Yet the homicidal characters depicted by Joe Pesci and Robert DeNiro in GoodFellas could walk into any of Tupac's or the Notorious B.I.G.'s records and feel right at home, Tupac and the Notorious B.I.G. didn't make records for the NAACP; they made harsh, contemplative, graphic, deliberately violent American pulp art.

Tupac's hip hop Jimmy Cagney and the Notorious B.I.G.'s Edward G. Robinson didn't die for their sins or the one's they rhymed about; they died for their lives—the lives they chose and the lives that chose them. Rap lyrics that describe violence are a natural consequence of a world where a sixteen-year-old is shot at close range over his jacket by classmates, where a fifteen-year-old boy is fatally stabbed by another teen over his glasses, where a seventeen-year-old is stabbed to death after hitting another teen with an errant basketball pass. In a world where crack-empowered gangs run on a philosophy of old-fashioned, excessive, insatiable, and unending revenge—one that is supported by the plots of American classics from The Searchers to Star Wars—gangsta rap is just further exploration of this theme.

There is an elemental nihilism in the most controversial crack-era hip hop that wasn't concocted by the rappers but reflects the mentality and fears of young Americans of every color and class living an exhausting, edgy existence, in and out of big cities. Like crack dealing, this nihilism may die down, but it won't disappear because the social conditions that inspired the trafficking and the underlying artistic impulse that ignited nihilistic rap have not disappeared. And because, deep in the American soul, it speaks to us and we like the sound of its voice.

Questions
1. "Gangsta rap (or reality rap or whatever descriptive phrase you like) is a direct by-product of the crack explosion... first came crack rocks, then gangsta rap" (paragraph 32). What examples does George use to prove his point? Do you agree with his statement? Explain why. If not, then what do you think gangsta rap is a direct product of? Be specific in your response.
2. In what context is incarceration raised in the article?
3. How does George define gangsta rap? Write down his definition. Can you imagine any additional definitions?
4. Write an essay about any musician you classify as a gangsta rap artist. Why do you classify the artist in this way? Do you believe that there would be readers who would disagree? In your paper make your thesis clear and then use specific examples to persuasively argue your perspective. You may also want to comment on whether or not you think the artist would resist the gangsta rap label.
5. Using George's excerpt as a model, write a short paper tracing the historical roots of any genre of music.

The Angry Appeal of Eminem Is Cutting Across Racial Lines

LYNETTE HOLLOWAY