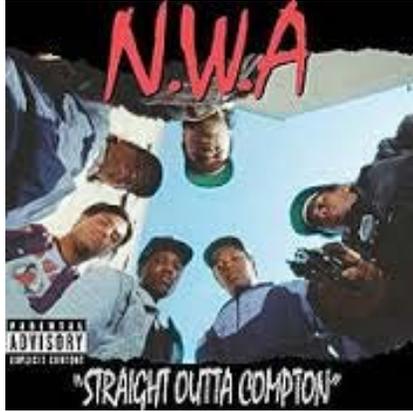


“Straight Outta Compton”—N.W.A (1988)

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Essay by Ben Westhoff (guest post)*



“Straight Outta Compton” LP



N..W.A

Gangsta rap existed before “Straight Outta Compton,” but N.W.A’s landmark 1988 album popularized the genre and serves as its standard bearer even today. The mythology of the artists behind its creation also continues to loom large: Eazy-E, the Compton crack dealer who used his profits to finance a hip-hop career; Dr. Dre, his neighbor who’d most recently been DJ-ing in flamboyant, sequined outfits for a song-and-dance group; Ice Cube, the ostentatious high school rapper from South Central Los Angeles whose writing gifts matched his aggressive delivery. But it was the characters they imagined--both militarized street kids sick of being humiliated by the cops and brash punks on the hunt for sex and cheap booze--that shaped the album, marching in time to Dr. Dre’s assault of chopped samples, wailing sirens, guitar riffs, and rapid drum machine beats, all of it more tuneful than it sounds on paper. Rounded out by the group’s other firebrand rapper, MC Ren, Dr. Dre’s production partner, MC Yella, and electro-rap holdover Arabian Prince--not to mention hugely influential ghostwriter D.O.C.--N.W.A reshaped hip-hop music in their own image.

They called it “reality rap,” but in the beginning it was far from clear that N.W.A would rap unvarnished lyrics threatening the status quo. Dr. Dre and Ice Cube’s earlier music disparaged the gang lifestyle, and just about everyone in the group admired Prince. Dre and Yella’s early press photos show the Purple One’s sartorial influence, while Arabian Prince and Cube (who once called himself Purple Ice) even *named* themselves after him. It was Eazy-E who envisioned N.W.A’s image, one that reflected his own gang-banging, drug-dealing demeanor. Eazy had no music industry experience to speak of when he paid the group’s mentor, Alonzo Williams, a few hundred dollars to introduce him to veteran music manager Jerry Heller, who, despite his credentials, was unable to land the group a major record contract. Instead, “Straight Outta Compton” was released by Eazy’s fledgling Ruthless Records, under a distribution deal from Priority Records, a Los Angeles upstart that so-far lacked hip-hop credibility, and whose most famous artist were the California Raisins.

The lack of industry polish surely benefitted the album. Working without a corporate filter, their tracks were as raw and shocking as possible. On a tiny budget, the still-teenaged Cube and Ren pushed each other during all-night studio sessions, while Dre quickly conceived and executed the work's New York-centric sound, inspired by Def Jam stalwarts Public Enemy and the Beastie Boys. It would later take the increasingly-perfectionist Dre a decade or more to create a single album; the fact that he was living in near-poverty in the late '80s incentivized him to work efficiently. Yella helped execute his vision, and the production was also aided by Donovan "The Dirt Biker" Smith--who owned the Torrance studio where they worked, the winningly-named Audio Achievements--and Arabian Prince, who left the group in short order over a financial dispute with Heller.

"Straight Outta Compton" today is best remembered for the opening title track and "Fuck the Police." The former epitomizes the group's bombast, with Ice Cube warning he has a *gat that's pointed at your ass* and isn't afraid to use it. Cube himself wasn't actually from Compton, and it isn't immediately obvious what sparks his character's anger, but the details are less important than the vivid expression of rage Cube elevated to an art form. MC Ren sounds even more nihilistic, an unhinged "motherfucking villain" who will shoot you without so much as an explanation why. Eazy-E's character supplies the comic relief, toying with cops and making your sister think he loves her. "Fuck the Police," meanwhile, puts a laser focus on the group's primary antagonist, the LAPD, then notorious for discriminatory tactics against African-American men in their attempts to stem Los Angeles's swelling murder rate. To call the song shocking is a vast understatement; advocating revenge against those who would shake someone down simply for possessing *a little bit of gold and a pager* and who had *the authority to kill a minority*, simply wasn't said in popular culture at that time. "Fuck the Police's" resonance was absolute and its influence impossible to overstate, inspiring generations of admirers from rappers to marchers protesting the treatment of everyone from Rodney King to Michael Brown.

The rest of the album varies in tone and pace. "Gangsta Gangsta" and the remixes of "8 Ball" and "Dopeman" echo the opening tracks's gleeful brutality, while "If It Ain't Ruff," "I Ain't the 1," and "Express Yourself" give Ren, Cube, and Dre, respectively, opportunities to further sketch their characters. Album closer "Something 2 Dance 2" is a sonic time capsule of the kinder, gentler, early L.A. hip-hop sound that suddenly felt out of place amidst N.W.A's new, hard style. Overall "Straight Outta Compton" occupies the sweet spot between the group's light-hearted, unauthorized 1987 debut "N.W.A and the Posse" and their brutally misogynist 1991 follow-up (and swan song) "Efil4zaggin."

Following "Compton's" release Ice Cube left the group and began a fruitful solo career, as would Dr. Dre a couple of years later. They both blamed the group's manager, Jerry Heller, and the label owner, Eazy-E, for underpaying them, and the caustic diss songs these disputes inspired kicked off a new, sinister era of hip-hop where beef on record began spilling over into real life, resulting in the murders of rap titans Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls in the mid-'90s. But before personal acrimony and arguments over riches derailed N.W.A's vision, "Straight Outta Compton's" perfected flows over melodious beats expressed social anguish in a vital way, more plainly and effectively than anything yet heard in music.

Ben Westhoff is the award-winning author of “Original Gangstas: Tupac Shakur, Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, Ice Cube, and the Birth of West Coast Rap,” and a writer-at-large for “The Guardian” whose work has also appeared in “The Wall Street Journal,” on NPR, in “Rolling Stone,” “Playboy,” “Vice,” “Oxford American,” “Pitchfork,” and others. He is the former “L.A. Weekly” music editor, and his 2011 book on southern hip-hop “Dirty South: OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-Hop” was a “Library Journal” best seller.