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Beyond Boundaries: The History, Culture and Politics of San Diego Gangsta Rap

Introduction

Over the last thirty-plus years of hip hop's global popularity, artists from San Diego have only received minimal exposure. With the exception of two albums produced by Jayo Felony, no San Diego rappers have produced albums with major record labels or distribution. The mainstream exposure that San Diego rappers have received has been in their cameo experiences with artists from the Los Angeles area and San Francisco Bay area. This experience of San Diego hip hop artists tends to reflect a larger historical trend of the history of San Diego's communities of culture.

Since the early twentieth century, San Diego has long been promoted as an Anglo-American paradise that was removed from the ethnic amalgamation of the East Coast and the racial conflicts that plagued other cities in the West. Amidst the cultural struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, Mayor (and future California Governor) Pete Wilson tagged San Diego as "America's Finest City". For the last four decades, this moniker has obscured increasing legacy of inequality.

The proximity of San Diego to the international media market of Los Angeles has seemingly had an adverse effect on San Diego's media machine. The San Diego news has traditionally been able to label social inequality and urban violence as native of Los Angeles County, 100 miles to the north. For example, in the late 1990s, the reality television show *LAPD* which chronicled the Los Angeles Police Department was marketed on San Diego television as a foreign experience. The local commercials for the show stated that once San Diegans viewed

LAPD they would be happy they lived in San Diego. However, this could not be further from the truth. A close examination of San Diego's history exposes that its resemblance to the cultural, social and political histories of Los Angeles. However, it could be argued, very convincingly, that the isolation of San Diego out of the public eye of greater Southern California and the United States has actually caused the disparities in San Diego to grow even deeper than the ones in Los Angeles.¹

Even though San Diego Hip Hop has not received much mainstream attention by the major corporations and publishing houses, the commercial music industry's neglect of San Diego has allowed for a vibrant independent and underground hip hop culture to grow. San Diego's underground hip hop community has challenged the dominant narrative of San Diego and even complicated the traditional demarcations in hip hop. San Diego rap music offers an alternative history that exposes the history of racial inequality, gang proliferation, drug abuse, poverty, unemployment and police brutality that has plague San Diego's communities of color. The independent productions of San Diego rappers have imagined a San Diego without police repression and gang violence. It represents a version of hip hop culture where conscious hip hop and gangsta rap cannot be so easily separated. Instead, San Diego artists have crossed racial lines, class boundaries and gang allegiances to create a "temporary autonomous zone" of hip hop culture.

In this paper I will survey the history of culture and politics of San Diego gangsta rap and hip hop culture. I ask the following questions about San Diego gangsta rap: How does it fit into the history of hip hop and the larger African American Vernacular tradition? What caused the emergence of early San Diego hip hop? What were some of the early gangsta rappers? And

¹ This is actually the premise of the Mike Davis, Kelly Mayhew and Jim Miller book *Under the Perfect Sun: The San Diego Tourists Never See* (2003).

what are some central themes to San Diego gangsta rap? I will survey the history of San Diego over the past 40 years, examining themes of gang proliferation, the influx of drugs into the community, the increase incarceration rates, biased policing the critique of the popular media industries by San Diego rappers.

“Beyond A Boundary”

The title of this paper comes from the memoir on cricket by CLR James, *Beyond a Boundary*. In the book, James argues that what happened inside of the boundary line on cricket effected and reflected the life of West Indians outside it and the life of West Indians had the same also effected and reflected the game. The first chapter of the book is titled, “The Window.” As a child, James’ window overlooked the local cricket field. He later realized that through this window he did not only view cricket, but he viewed the world. While the prevalence of cricket in James’ native Trinidad obviously is an example of British colonialism and imperialism. However, James also viewed cricket as representative of Pan-Africanism and the anti-colonialism. James saw cricket as not a sport but an art form. The creation of the West Indies cricket team serves as an example of how cricket engaged Trinidadians and other West Indians into the political realm. James writes, “The conflicts and rivalries which rose out of the conditions which I have described gripped me. My Puritan heart burned with indignation at injustice in the sphere of sport...Cricket had plunged me into politics long before I was aware of it. When I did turn to politics I did not have much to learn.”²

Cricket in the West Indies resembles what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha calls “colonial mimicry”. In colonial mimicry, the colonized appropriates the ways of the colonizer to

² CLR James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Yellow Jersey Press, 1963/2005), 87.

disrupt any belief of the colonizer's essential superiority.³ Similarly, critical race theorist Imani Perry suggests that hip hop engages in a "thug mimicry". In a critique and disruption of white supremacy, rappers become the stereotypes of African Americans. "Unlike Bhabha's mimicry, thug mimicry does not subvert notions of essentialist superiority by becoming indistinguishable from the oppressor; rather, it dislocates the authority for defining the black underworld and manipulating the negative images of black America in order to serve the interests of white America. The artist might mirror the stereotype...effectively and subvert not in terms of critiquing itself, but in terms of giving a voice to the stereotypical figure," Perry writes.⁴

Similar to CLR James, the San Diego rapper Mally Mal used the classic trope of the window to describe the society he saw in his 2003 track "Room with a View". In between choruses where a woman sings, "Lookin' through my window, what do I see? Troubles all around me, I thank God, he's with me," Mal talks about the violence, drug addiction, crime, prostitution, abortions, incarceration rates and unemployment that exists in his community. "Room with a View" is representative of gangsta rap's tradition. It is not about popularizing street life. Contrarily, it is a tale that personalizes the questionable decisions people in the ghetto make on a daily basis. For example, in the second verse Mal raps:

Kenyatta's been on the streets and prison dormitories
Runnin' up on fools that was born before me, mandatory
The house I grew in didn't adore this for me, but it tore me
Love wasn't showed but understood only, I understand completely
Now I know why some chase death, when it's life to be fed
Little TJ's bangin' wit' a price on his head
One of the rival's moms had to put ice on his head
He went over there, caught 'im, put somethin' nice to his head
God give life to the dead, Blue ain't likin' the Red
If there was no Kenyatta Queen, this King a prolly be dead.

³ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 109.

⁴ Ibid.

In this verse, Mal describes why he fell into the street life—a lack of love—but in the end of the verse he acknowledged that it is that the love of his companion is what rescued him from possible death. This concept of love and companionship runs throughout this track. From “homegirl” who’s “hot lettin’ cats run they dick all up in it” and “stay bendin’ over pretending the sex is authentic” to the young man who joined a gang because “the feeling of brotherhood and cohesion, got him reeled in,” Mal’s track is coded with tales that some specific San Diegans could directly relate to and understand and at the same time is a story that allows those not from San Diego’s communities of color to understand and relate to.

In San Diego, gangsta rap reflects both the effects of “internal colonization” but also the efforts of rappers to imagine and experience a community that transcends the effects of internal colonization. Ironically, the actions of the San Diego rapper and producer Cricet serves as an excellent of example attempts to move hip hop and Black San Diego beyond boundaries. Cricet, a member of the Neighborhood Crips gang (NHC), has produced music for Crips, Bloods, Blacks and Mexicans in San Diego, California. His most successful endeavor is the production of Mitchy Slick’s 2001 album *Triggeration Station*. Mitchy Slick is a member of the rival and neighboring Lincoln Park Bloods gang (LPB). However, while students at Lincoln High School in Southeast San Diego, Mitch and Cricet forged a bond of mutual respect.⁵ Their union allowed for *Triggeration Station* to become an underground classic.

Another rapper that forged a bond in high school was Black Mikey. Originally known as Mikey CK, Black Mikey was is a veteran San Diego hip hopper. He began as a breakdancer in the late 1970s and later he began to rap. San Diego’s underground community had always been infused with the street life, so once Black Mikey joined the Southside 5/9 Brims blood gang (5/9)

⁵ Cricet, “E-Mortal Infamous,” *Blue Damien: The Pirate Ship* (2003).

he did not cease to rapping. In fact, he gained reasonable notoriety as once he began rapping. In fact, members of the 5/9 Brims routinely threw parties at the Willie Henderson Sports Complex, colloquially known as 4/5 Park in San Diego because of its proximity to 45th Street. The parties at 4/5 park often consisted of breakdancing competitions and emcee battles. Around that time, Mikey and Cricet developed a rap rivalry that was magnified by their rival gang affiliations. Mikey remembers, “We’d battle from school and it poured out into the streets. I used to go to his hood; he used to come to my hood. We’d battle, battle, battle. They dropped a song called “Executioner’s Style.” I dropped a song called “Understand Me.” And it was just back and forth, we was on one.”⁶ Because of their rap battles, Mikey remembered they actually drew fire from their own gangs. Despite this ire, they decided to momentarily join forces. Instead of rapping against each other, they decided to enter a rap contest as a duo. Walking on stage with blue and red bandanas tied together, they made hip hop history and became the first Blood and Crip gangsta rap duo to publicly perform in unity. Black Mikey and Cricet won the competition but their union was temporary. Mikey’s run-ins with the law as well as the growing gang tensions in San Diego prevented their union from being sustained.⁷ More than a decade passed before they would be reunited in the studio. That being said, their temporary union was representative of what San Diego hip hop could possibly become.

Origins of San Diego Hip Hop

Hip hop culture and gangsta rap is one of the most recent incarnations of the Black vernacular tradition. Gangsta rap and hip hop (like Black culture as a whole) has often been essentialized. Most historians claim its nexus to be in New York City and consisting of four or

⁶ “Black Mikey and San Diego Rap History, pt. 1,” *SDRaps.com*

⁷ *Ibid.*

five elements (emceeing, break dancing, graffiti, deejaying, and clothing/beatboxing depending on the historian) but Hip-Hop should not be reduced to a handful of elements that limit its historical significance and complexity. Hip-Hop is a syncretic art that has brought together the old and the new. Furthermore, it has created and recreated. For this reason, Gangsta Rap is as wide reaching as the circumstances that created it.

Apart from the various deejays and emcees that emerged from the rubble of New York's slums in upper Manhattan and South Bronx; Gangsta Rap also calls upon the oral, written, culturally expressive traditions of toasting and boasting, urban/crime novels, comedy and a plethora of Black music including the Blues, Soul and Funk. Consequently, Donald Goines, Robert Beck, Rudy Ray Moore and James Brown's collective bodies of work have made them amongst the most referenced and revered of Gangsta Rap's elders. All of these men were able to use their work to reclaim the masculinity and dignity of African American men while concurrently criticizing the mainstream establishment. Cultural critic LH Stallings especially described the literature of Goines and Beck as being "hip-hop neo-slave narratives" that describe the protagonists' bouts with the new forms of bondage: incarceration, drugs and prostitution.⁸ Yet, the expression of African-American identity in times of terror or tragedy does not release it from its own paradoxes. Problematically, Gangsta Rap is indeed a masculine medium. While reclaiming dignity and humanity it has often reinforced oppressive systems of capitalism and misogyny (for which Gangsta Rap has been heavily criticized). Likewise, gangsta rappers have often been concerned with individual and cultural uplift, criticizing the system while making very little institutional change. All things considered, Gangsta Rap and its precursors have allowed for the redefinition of self and a platform for social criticism. Gangsta Rappers have

⁸ LH Stallings, "I'm Goin Pimp Whores: the Goines Factor and the Theory of a Hip-Hop Slave Narrative," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 177.

used their words and their bodies to reclaim a sense of pride for and control over their own existence in the face of extreme circumstances.

San Diego gangsta rap culture shares a common point of origin as its relatives in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay Areas. All three of these similar traditions began to distinguish themselves from the music produced on the East Coast in the mid-1980s. Similar to the larger metropolitan areas to the north, San Diego was a popular military outpost. With multiple Army, Navy and Marine Corps installations, San Diego has become an increasing international city since World War II. The diverse origins of San Diegans established allowed for hip hop to travel to San Diego very early. The first hip hop music to reach San Diego did not come on the airwaves; it came by way of mixtapes. Hip hop performances were recorded by deejays and audience members, copied, distributed, and played on portable cassette players. This disseminated the sounds of the deejays—and later the emcees. These mixtapes reached far beyond their origins in New York; Black and Puerto Rican military personnel sold and traded these tapes on military stations around throughout the United States and world.⁹ Black Mikey states, “But by this being the place where a lot of people in the military hung out, it was all walks of life running through here. People from the East Coast, the West Coast, Down South, from outside the United States—it was like a conglomerate. And it circulated. So we got all of the music—the BLS, KIIS 98.7 tapes—from back then with Chuck Chillout, Red Alert, Mr. Magic’s Rap Attack. A lot of that shit was going on, we was getting that shit...it was fun. We used to play the game, ‘Yeah, I’m from New York, son!’ A lot of used to do it and we used to emcee like them.”¹⁰

⁹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 53.

¹⁰ “Black Mikey and San Diego Rap History.”

Connections to New York, or at least the East Coast, are important status qualifiers in San Diego hip hop and gangsta rap scenes. It has allowed rapper to prove that hip hop is no novel to the identities of Black San Diegans. Cricet frequently raps about his uncle Chili Mac from Queens. In “Getting’ High All Nite” Cricet raps, “I got worldwide respect from my uncle Chili Mac from Queens/He used to cut grand groove when I was only fourteen/He came to janky ass Southeast with two turntables/Now I’m willing and able to plug up shit from my street cable/It was a trip, ‘cause he was teaching a young Crip/I used to ride with Born G and Prince Whip-A-Whip/They was teachin’ me the ropes of that real rap shit/Now I’m spraying all you niggas like Beat street spit.”¹¹ Similarly, Malik “Mally Mal” Kenyatta and Jermaine “Complex” Simpson both remember that their first exposure to hip hop was not through the radio but through mixtapes that they heard played as very young children.¹² Mally—whose family is from Ohio and Georgia—frequently returned to the East Coast to visit his relatives. During one trip in 1979, Mally was only three years old but he remembers hearing The Sugar Hill Gang being played through a car stereo as he sat outside. A few years later, he heard “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. These experience not only influenced him as a fan of hip hop but even his name—hip hop pioneer Melly Mel was a member of the Furious Five and Marly Marl was a member of the legendary Juice Crew.

Direct connections to hip hop’s Mecca helped to establish the credibility of San Diego performers but the events of the 1980s established its authenticity. Black Mikey states:

A new dawn came. And we started saying, ‘Shit, well maybe we can sound like ourselves...I don’t know if it was Ice T’s [‘The Coldest Rap] or NWA that started it. But once we started sounding like us and we realized that we had a story to tell about where we come from, it took another turn. Because in that, you could tell a story about where

¹¹ Cricet, “Getting’ High All Nite,” *Blue Damien* (2003).

¹² Malik Kenyatta is not Mally Mal’s real name. His name has been concealed out of respect for his privacy.

you come from and you could represent the neighborhood and you could annihilate an emcee all at the same time. So we metamorphosized into more than just battle rappers. We became griots. We became oral traditionists.¹³

Hip hop scholar and professor Murray Forman identifies this as “extreme local”. He explains that rap artists draw their motivation from their overall regional affiliations as well as even more specific attachments. For example, African American young men and women in Hip-Hop culture defeated concepts of essentialism by focusing on specific occurrences. Forman explains the specificity of rap music, noting that it is laced with “explicit references to particular streets, boulevards and neighborhoods, telephone area codes, postal zip codes, or other sociospatial information.”¹⁴ “Representin’ as a concept in Hip-Hop is connected to the self-expression that is integral to Hip-Hop because your place of origin is key.¹⁵ Not all communities of color experience the same issues and struggles and this is what regional Hip-Hop illuminates.

Hip-Hop has traditionally been about self-expression. This has been its attraction to young Blacks and Brown people within the United States, along with disenfranchised people worldwide. Critical theorist Todd Boyd explains, “It is inherently about the ‘I’, which is an attempt to distinguish oneself from the crowd, when identity is so often conflated to fit the demands of those in power.”¹⁶

The earliest rap music recorded in Southern California tended to reference West Coast phenomena while sampling East Coast raps. (For example, early Toddy Tee productions, “Rockman, Rockman” and “The Clucks Come Out at Night” were sample of UTFO’s “Roxanne, Roxanne” and Whodini’s “The Freaks Come out at Night”.) Between 1984 and 1986, the

¹³ “Black Mikey and the History of San Diego Rap.”

¹⁴ Murray Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press), xvii.

¹⁵ Todd Boyd, *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 48-49.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 48.

growing popularity of hip hop had a series of violent clashes with the crack cocaine epidemic and the influx of street gangs in Southern California. From San Diego to Long Beach, rap fans that were also gang members showed up at the concerts and some of the most famous concert riots broke out. While these riots were certainly sensationalized by the mainstream media, they also represented the mix between hip hop and Southern California street life.¹⁷ Following the 1986 “Raising Hell” tour riot in Long Beach, it would be over two years before Run DMC would return to Southern California. Neither Run DMC nor the media applied a deep analysis to the concert riots in Long Beach; the media blamed rap music and Run DMC blamed the region itself.¹⁸ No one realized that the gang members were rap fans. With Run DMC refusing to place California venues and some radio stations refusing to play hip hop, local rappers were able to grow in the void. The Los Angeles area had rappers like Ice-T and NWA, the Bay Area had Too Short and Mike “The Mac” Robinson and San Diego had Gangsta Ern. Gangsta Ern, a 5/9 Brim, helped to establish some of the popular themes in San Diego gangsta rap: Gang proliferation, the crack cocaine epidemic and police repression.

“More than Just Gangsta Rappers”

As Imani Perry recognized, “the consciousness of the hustler or thug, the outlaw, provides insight into the psyches of a community rarely humanized in our society. But in a different fashion, the role of the drug dealer or hustler as an outlaw has also been used as a metaphor for a larger ethic of outlawry within hip hop.”¹⁹ Gangsterism has never been a central theme to gangsta rap. In fact the violence in the lyrics are rarely meant to be taken literally. “Rather they are boating raps in which the imagery of gang bangin’ is used metaphorically to

¹⁷ Patrick Goldstein, “Can Rap Survive Gang War?,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 August 1986.

¹⁸ “42 Are Hurt as Gang Fighting Breaks Up California Concert,” *New York Times*, 19 August 1986.

¹⁹ Perry, 104

challenge competitors on the mic,” Historian Robin D.G. Kelley writes.²⁰ Black Mikey’s perception of San Diego gangsta rap was similar to the aforementioned scholars when he stated:

Hip-hop has always been in me, homie. Regardless of the neighborhood I was raised in, we were always b-boys first. Even if we were in khakis and stars and gangbanging in our hood, we always met up and congregated at the park where that cardboard was laid down, that box was slapping that 2-3 break by Chuck Chillout or something like that. Everybody was doing the windmills and nickels and the halos and footwork and that uprocks and we was all doing it. It’s in us. And it’s in me to be more than just my geographical location. Just like Orko and Anti-Citizens are emcees and griots, so am I. So I can be on both sides because I am both sides. It’s a lot of other emcees out there that won’t say it but they are both sides as well. My boy Damu is both sides. He emcees his ass off. It’s a lot of us that they say is just gangsta. If you listen to the albums, you’ll see we are more than just gangsta rappers.²¹

This notwithstanding, the proliferation of local Bloods and Crips gangs—as well as out of town cliques from Los Angeles—formed the impetus for San Diego gangsta rap. According to Perry, drug dealing (and gang banging) as metaphor reflecting an actual category of human existence as well as providing a symbolic method of communicating a kind of power within the hood, an overwhelmingly powerless context, and an exploitation of the power created by fear of the ghetto by outsiders (thug mimicry).²²

Street gangs are just as much a part of San Diego’s recent history as it is Los Angeles County’s. While San Diego street gangs and party crews existed before the 1970s, the first Crips and Bloods appear in the early 1970s. The East San Rapper and East Dago Mob Crip Lil CS explained that gangs are nothing new to San Diego in an interview he stated:

Muthafuckas underestimating Daygo, we got some heat out here, you know, muthafuckas been on that gangsta shit out here for the longest, you know people ain't heard about Daygo that much besides Jayo but they don't really know how it is, you know what I mean? But there's been Bloods and Crips out here almost as long as L.A. had em, you

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Black Mikey and San Diego Rap History, Part 1”

²² Perry, 104.

know L.A. started like in the late 60's, Daygo's first gangstas was prolly like 72, 73 or so, so we grew up in that shit just like they did.²³

The first gangs in San Diego were mostly Crips, while Blood gangs began to appear later on. Gangs appeared in San Diego via a Los Angeles County Probation Department effort titled "Operation Transfer."²⁴ African American gang members were transferred to San Diego, where they quickly began to re-create the budding culture already taking place in Los Angeles County. In 1972, a Crip was transferred to San Diego where he started a chapter of his Los Angeles set, the East Coast Crips.²⁵ The San Diego gang was called West Coast Crips but retained the moniker "The Businessmen" which was a nod to an East Coast Crips clique in LA (as well as an older East Side gang).²⁶ Similarly, a member of the 5/9 Brims—a dormant Brim set in San Diego—was transferred to San Diego and created a new base for his set.²⁷ The Neighborhood Crips and Skyline Pirus also have direct roots in Los Angeles County. From the early 1970s on the San Diego and California street cultures mixed and gangs grew.

Southeast San Diego is where most but not all of the Black gangs still resided. Though the Crips were the first to settle in San Diego, the Bloods have grown so profoundly that some refer to San Diego as "Blood Capital." San Diego is home to Crip sets such as: the West Coast Crips, Neighborhood Crips, East Dago Mob Crips, and Linda Vista Crips. Some of the Blood sets are the 5/9 Brims, Little Africa Pirus, Emerald Hills Bloods, Lincoln Park Bloods, O'Farrell Park Banksters, and Skyline Pirus. Throughout history, San Diego's rap crews have reflected hood or gang loyalties as well as alliances: Wrongkind Records consists of Emerald, Lincoln and 5/9 Brims members; The E-Mortal Gang consisted of Neighborhood Crips; The Hound

²³ "Lil CS Interview," *West Coast Interaktiv*, <http://www.westcoastinteraktiv.de/lilcsinterview2.php> (2003).

²⁴ Bob Sipchen, *Baby Insane and the Buddha*, (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 50.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Curtis Howard, *Crips and Politics: The Story of My Life Involving Gangs, Drugs and Prison* (Unpublished work, 2001) XXX, 69.

²⁷ Sipchen, 50.

Foundation consists of 5/9 Brims; Bomb Leery rappers tend to be West Coast Crip; and The Mobstaz were East Dago Mob veterans.

It should be noted that while San Diego's gang history is intertwined into its rap history, for the most part, San Diego rappers have been reluctant to use mixtapes to address rival gang members because of the repercussions it could have on the streets of San Diego—instead they have actually tended to produce compilation albums together (such as *New West I* and *II* as well as *Str-8 Off the Streetz of Southeast*). Mitchy Slick articulated this concept when he stated:

To me, I come from a situation where you don't say nothing to nobody unless you really wanna get into some shit. Cause where I'm from the littlest things can escalate. And the thing came from where Jay took shots at me on an underground rap tape on some rap shit. I don't look at myself as no rapper type of shit. I don't play with that, I don't play with words. I don't make statements to people and shit like that. So basically it was more of a situation where he shot some shit at me on some rap shit or whatever, and I just ain't with that. A few things been discussed between his folks and my folks or whatever, but me and him don't have no beef. Me and nobody ain't never gon' beef if I don't know you.²⁸

Gangsta Ern, a 5/9 Brim was the first gangsta rapper to send shockwaves beyond San Diego. While Mally, a former member of the Emerald Hills Bloods, did not know Gangsta Ern, he bought his cassette tapes from the local shopping center Fam Mart. He remembered being very proud that a San Diego rapper seemed to make it but also feeling sad in 1992 after finding out Gangsta Ern was killed. From 1986 to 1992, Gangsta Ern recorded raps that, similar to NWA and Ice T, transcended local gang conflicts and addressed larger issues. Two tracks, “Nation of Drugs” from his 1989 EP 2 *The Hard Way* and “That's How it Happened” from the 1992 EP *Up Against It*, critique the cocaine epidemic, influx in the growth of the prison industrial complex, racism, economic disparity and biased policing.

²⁸ “Mitchy Slick Interview,” DubCNN, (January 2003)
<<http://www.dubcnn.com/interviews/wc2kmitchyslick/>>

By 1985 and 1986, crack cocaine became a national epidemic. While many rappers neglected to address this in their rhymes others did. The crack cocaine epidemic gave rappers from West to East a common topic to address. California did not only experience the arrival of crack cocaine but it also experienced a rise in street gangs and easy access to weapons. All of these elements created a very unique experience in the streets of California. It also helped to separate California's brand of rap—originally referred to as reality rap by Ice T; it was later branded as gangsta rap. While most of the historical analysis of this era has focused on rappers from the Bay Area and Los Angeles County, the rise of San Diego rap paralleled the others as opposed to following it.

Similar to NWA's 1987 track "Dopeman" but with a deeper analysis, Gangsta Ern critiqued the presence of crack cocaine epidemic and even suggested that the Nixon, Reagan and Bush administrations were complicit in crack cocaine's appearance in Black neighborhoods. Gangsta Ern acknowledged, that "the problems over here started overseas" but acknowledged the differential treatment by way of the criminal justice system when he asked, "The penalties are stiff for all drug addicts, but why don't the drug lords ever get static?"²⁹ While Democratic and Republican state and federal legislators were authoring tough mandatory minimum laws, Gangsta Ern's tracks addressed issues that legislators of both parties would not address until almost a decade later with amidst the release of *Dark Alliance* by journalist Gary Webb. Gangsta Ern extended his critique to Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign when he rapped, "Why do poor black addicts go to prison, when rich white addicts all go to clinics?/They got a war on drugs, they'll never win/Until the white collar crime all comes to an end/Nancy Reagan, she said say no to drugs/Did it work? (Hell No) All we got was blood." In Gangsta Ern's quaint

²⁹ Gangsta Ern, "Nation of Drugs," 2 *The Hard Way* (1989)

observation, the disproportionate blame being placed on poor African Americans was not only racial but a poor allocation of resources. Gangsta Ern went on to state,

Kids selling drugs, to stay alive
While politicians in the closet, gettin' high
All the check points, drugs still getting through,
Judges and lawyers, gettin' paid off too
They don't deal in g's out the keys,
They deal in tons, from overseas
Cartels straight cut 'em off,
So they mad, because they profits loss
So they ready for war, no matter the cost
Spending multi-millions and Bush is the boss
In a nation of drugs...A nation of Drugs

We got Bush on tv, making all these speeches
Wantin' more money, but we know we gon' need this
Push a drug war to the class who's coolin'
Doin' this and doin' that but who are they foolin'?
You, not me, 'cause I'm not buyin' it,
Ask the politicians and they keep denying it,
Drugs in America, he says he won't have it,
But how can he stop, a crazy bad habit?
My mother's on drugs, my brother's on drugs
Just because they use it, they're labeled like thugs
Reagan to Bush, I really don't understand
It seems like Richard Nixon, made this plan
In a nation of drugs...In a nation of drugs

But Gangsta Ern's critique was not only applied to the government. His last verse was a warning to younger generations to not become political pawns: "We got a little workers that's in every town,/Give 'em a little forty and they try to clown/Give 'em a sack and they pass it out/Not a street dealer, 'cause you got the clout/Tellin' all the girls that he got the dollar,/Walkin' 'round town wit' gold on his collar/Rollin' so hard, but it came to an end/Caught a federal case, now you in the pen/Pushin' behind this is win or lose,/So if you come up short, that was the President's move/In a nation of drugs."³⁰

³⁰ Ibid.

“That’s How it Happened” reflects what Imani Perry calls “hip hop realism”. Perry states, “hip hop realism is filled with metaphors and metonyms of existence that trouble listeners or commentators from wide range of political, social, and intellectual perspectives.”³¹ But Gangsta Ern’s realism is not metaphoric, instead—in a reflection of the extreme local aspect of San Diego gangsta rap—Ern uses his verses to talk about senseless acts of violence that took place in Southeast San Diego and to even castigate OG gang members who have snitched on others gang members for fear of going to prison. The first verse of “That’s How it Happened” refers to the 1988 shooting death of Officer Jerry Hartless. While the facts of this case are worthy of a full-length book, it is important to point out that Gangsta Ern once again showed keen foresight when he proclaimed that the person the police arrested for the murder was not the person and questioned the reliability of San Diego’s confidential informants. The defendants in this case were eventually freed.

The creation of the various interagency and intra-agency gang units compounded the already troubling facts. LAPD created the Community Resource Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) Unit, while the LASD had Operation Safe Streets (OSS). SWAT, CRASH and OSS became the model for cities like, Long Beach, Fresno, Sacramento, Oakland, San Diego and other cities.³² The purported catalyst for these expansions was the proliferation of street gangs and street-level selling of crack-cocaine. Contrarily, research has proven that African Americans and gangs were never disproportionate users or dealers of crack, gang-suppression units seemingly exacerbated the gang problem.³³

³¹ Perry, 40.

³² Eric Bailey, “Gangs of Long Beach,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 December 1985. Christian Parenti, “SWAT Teams and Paramilitary Policing,” *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (New York: Verso, 1999).

³³ Malcolm W. Klein, Cheryl L. Maxson, and Lea C. Cunningham, “Crack, Street Gangs, and Violence,” *Criminology* 29, no.4 (1991): 623-650. Cheryl L. Maxson, *Street Gangs and Drug Sales in Two Suburban Cities* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency

Policing had the dual effect of criminalizing youth of color and actually spreading the gang problem. The Crips and Bloods of San Diego and other places were actually started after the Los Angeles County agencies exiled various men in the early 1970s, as a part of “Operation Transfer”.³⁴ Interestingly, the gang sweeps known collectively as “Operation Blue Rag” are credited with reducing the number of Crip gangs but increasing the number of Bloods in San Diego.³⁵ Although, the most famed of these anti-gang programs was the LAPD’s Operation HAMMER, created in 1988.

As it was mentioned earlier, the prison industrial complex and biased policing are central themes. Politicians used the crack cocaine epidemic for economic purposes. They expanded the prison population to take advantage of the prison labor workforce. Scholar-Activist Ruthie Gilmore chronicled the expansion of California’s prison system roughly from the 1970s to the 1990s. She focuses on the expansion of the prison as an industrial venture.³⁶ She points to the historical employment trends in California and nationally. California shifted from having a state economy with an abundance of industrial workers, to a state with high unemployment, especially for its people of color. But interestingly, while the unemployment rates rose in California so did the gross state product.³⁷ The country made money off the unemployment of African Americans and other groups. Gilmore notes that since between 1982 and 1996, the California Department of Corrections has experienced a 500% growth in its prison population. California’s prison

Prevention, 1995). *Gangsta King: Raymond Lee Washington*, Narrated by Robert Stack, 60 min. (Koch Entertainment Distribution, 2003).

³⁴ Curtis Howard, *Crips and Politics: The Story of My Life Involving Gangs, Drugs and Prison* (Unpublished work, 2001), xxx. Bob Sipchen, *Baby Insane and the Buddha*, (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 50. “Lil CS Interview,” *West Coast Interaktiv*, <http://www.westcoastinteraktiv.de/lilcsinterview2.php> (2003).

³⁵ Operation Blue Rag initiated by the cooperative information given by Baby Insane of the Neighborhood Crips.

³⁶ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “From Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian Militarism: Finance Capital, Land, Labor and Opposition in the Rising California Prison State.” Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1998. Keynesianism is primarily known as trickle down economics, where the laypersons supposedly prosper from the growth of big business, because of the increased employment.

³⁷ Ibid, “Globalisation and US prison growth: from military Keynesianism to post-Keynesian militarism,” *Race and Class*, Oct 1998, 17.

population alone grew to 145,140 people, and two-thirds of those people were either Black or Brown.³⁸

Crime in California peaked in 1979 and drug use peaked in 1980.³⁹ What this says is that African Americans were being incarcerated for other reasons than simply crime. They were being incarcerated for the economic gains of the state and to soothe the panic that arose during the crack cocaine epidemic. People of African descent suffered the blame as the primary troublemakers. In California, the average cost to house an inmate is \$21,509.⁴⁰ Yet, forty seven percent, \$10,240, of the costs goes towards staffing the security and with majority of the state's prisons be located in rural towns, they have become a large employer of small-city Whites.⁴¹ Only six percent, \$1,347, of the funding goes towards inmate work and training programs.⁴² Much of the work is provided by outside corporations, some of which have actually relocated factories from Third World countries upon the employment of prisoners. Prisoners make everything from blue jeans to limousines.⁴³ Due to the low pay, between 15 cents and \$1.12 per hour, to the government subsidies given to corporations and agencies, prison industries are highly profitable. Groups such as Unicor and the California Prison Industry Authority have recorded tens of millions of dollars in annual profit.⁴⁴ These various industrial endeavors have proven that crime is not the sole reason for the increased incarceration rates.

³⁸ Gilmore, "From Military Keynesianism to Post Keynesian Militarism," 1.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Tito Valdez, Jr. "Prison Life Inside the California Department of Corrections," (1997).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Parenti, 230.

⁴⁴ Parenti, 232-233.

There are now over 140,000 inmates in California's penal system and 2.3 million people are incarcerated nationwide; San Diego has not remained untouched from this trend.⁴⁵ Many veteran San Diego rappers have experienced run-in with the law and because of the "three strikes" legislation, as well as other mandatory minimum laws, some rappers see music as their only shot toward success.

Jayo Felony, an NHC member, frequently references prison life on his albums. The hit song "The Loc is On His Own," from his 1995 debut LP *Take A Ride With Me*, was about a young man unable to call home because his mother put a block on her phone—as well as all of tribulations behind bars. Jayo's 1998 second LP, *Whatcha Gonna Do?*, was a huge success behind bars. Though Jayo Felony is a Crip, even Bloods listened to Jayo on tape decks in prison. (Mitchy Slick also suggests that he sells more albums to people locked up than people on the street.) Jayo second LP the first track, "To my niggas in the pen, nigga a start a riot...fuck that shit, fuck that tryna be quiet, fuck that shit...They took the weights but keep the faith! They took the weights but keep the faith!" referring to the 1998 decision to remove weights from California prisons.⁴⁶ Even more intriguing is the progression of the album.

Jayo's album began with a prison escape, peaked with the song "Easy to Get In", and the escapee finally reaching home and concluded with "J.A.Y.O (Justice Against Y'all Oppressors) and the "Outro". "Easy to Get In" was a song about the prison system with the song taking the listener from juvenile hall, to camp, to youth authorities, to the penitentiary. Informing the listener it is easy to get in but hard to get out of prison. "J.A.Y.O (Justice Against Y'all Oppressors)" and the "Outro" criticized the futility of the sentencing procedures. Here Jayo

⁴⁵ Adam Liptak, "Inmate Count in the U.S. Dwarfs other Nations'," *The New York Times*, 23 April 2008, sec. A, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Dan Morain, "More Inmate Privileges to Fall In Get-Tough Drive," *Los Angeles Times* 9 February 1998.

asked, “how you gonna give a nigga triple-life? What am I supposed to do, die two times and comeback and do some more time.” Furthermore, he also proved himself skeptical of public defenders, district attorneys and even prison culture. Indeed, San Diego gangsta rappers have continuously combated the prison system with their lyrics.

As a youth, Bay Loc, an NHC member and E-Mortal Gang rapper, received a hefty prison sentence. In a 2005 discussion with Bay he explained that he spent more than ten years in prison, he felt he was unemployable and rap as his only option. Bay used his prison experiences to criticize the system prison system. In “We Angry” he rapped, Bay Loc, who too also received a hefty prison sentence as a youth, expresses some of the sentiment addressed by the various artists stating:

Peep when you walk, If these walls could talk,
They’d only tell the truth, California vicitimizes they youth
Delapidated roaches, infested cells,
my community fails, so skinheads get tossed over third rails
The time don’t never fit the crime, I refused to drop a dime
Since I wouldn’t tell, they crucified me to a prison cell
Living hell, [where] niggas hearts bleed.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, later that year Bay Loc was arrested for a parole violation and returned to prison.

Like Bay Loc, Lil CS was also arrested at a very young age. At age 18, Lil CS was arrested for being a part of a drug ring and sentenced to the ten years in prison because of the federal mandatory minimum laws. Young African Americans who were the target of crack cocaine epidemic legislation rebelled against the system. In 1993 and 1995, there were waves of protests by African American prisoners serving long sentences because of the crack law. In 1993, many people finally began to start reassessing the crack law. As earlier referenced, crack

⁴⁷ Baby Mike Loc, Bay Loc, Cricet, Jayo Felony, “We Angry,” *Str-8 Outta South East Compilation*, (Tha Planet Records, 2002).

was not a “Black drug”.⁴⁸ Instead, African Americans were being singled out. Furthermore, claims began to surface that prosecutors steered cocaine cases to the federal courts in order to ensure African American suspects faced more severe sentences. For this reason, prisoners formed political lobbying groups such as the Families Against Discriminatory Crack Laws. Furthermore, African American inmates increasingly began to look at the laws as being racist.⁴⁹ This is exemplified by a Lil CS who rapped, “the Crack Law/ that shit is straight fuckin’ biased/that’s why yo’ nigga was in the ’93 and ’95 riots.”

In 1993, anger began to brew in response to the long sentences Blacks received. African Americans made up 88 percent of federal crack defendants in 1993. Lil CS and others from California fought against the sentencing laws by rioting in federal penitentiaries. In 1995 the legality of the mandatory minimum sentences were taken to the federal court and upheld, thousands of inmates fought security guards, broke windows, set fires, and went on hunger strikes to protest against a system they thought was unjust and hypocritical.⁵⁰ They caused millions of dollars in damage, but most of all they gained a political consciousness and mobilized against laws that felt were unjust.

San Diego rappers have articulated that growth of the prison industrial complex and militarization of the police forces have also turned their neighborhoods into what Michel Foucault and Mike Davis termed, carceral cities. Methods of surveillance in prisons have become institutionalized into the way cities are now organized. In “Too Ghetto” Mitchy Slick asks, “Have you ever been to ‘Sunny San Diego’ before? Me either/The side where I reside is ether/The price of life is cheaper/Every nigga survivin’ off a sack, or he a tweaker/Against all

⁴⁸ Sam Vincent Meddis, “More white users, black arrests,” *USA TODAY*, 23 July 1993.

⁴⁹ “Federal prisoners protesting,” *USA TODAY*, 10 November 1993.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Diana R. Gordon, “Crack in the Penal System,” *Nation*, 4 December 1995.

odds/The Hood, the Coast, the East, The Klan, The Cops, my Moms, my Pops/Never could've imagined they was movin' into Hell/La Paz, Logan Block, Bay Vista Projects man it feel like jail/Security, the CO, Landlord the Warden/Money was still good 'til they got rid of Mr. Warren."⁵¹ However, increased policing has not only cost San Diegans money and freedom, it has also cost people their lives.

Two intriguing extensions of this tradition were "SDPDK" and "Face the Nation" by Complex. In the "nine-to-five" world, Complex doubles as Jermaine Simpson, a social worker with a BA in Sociology and M.Ed. in Counseling. His family and friends are affiliated with the West Coast Crips Rollin 30s and Neighborhood Crips Rollin' 40s. He uses his professional, personal and familial relationships as inspiration for his music.⁵² In "SDPDK" Complex (accompanied by Big Will) question who the real threat to the community is. "SDPDK" highlights the San Diego Police Department's history of corruption and abuse. In the second verse, Complex warns:

Look out for the Boys in Blue, not the Crips but the cops, the niggas that bust shots and run niggas off the blocks/Keep they shit cocked and ready for niggas that clock fetti/When we see the Babylons we break, like Rocksteady/They got heavy artillery/Work for Bill and Hillary/ And SWATs comin' deep wit' they mind set on killin' me...They trained to kill Blacks then hide the facts, cover they tracks/Plant keys of cocaine in niggas 'lacs/Wit' a knack for using excessive force, quick triggers/kick your door down and send the dog in do sic niggas.⁵³

Furthermore, Complex uses this song to chronicle a series of high-profiled accounts of police-brutality and officer-related shootings brought on by two decades of over policing. "SDPDK" and "Face the Nation" makes reference to the cases of Demetrius Dubose, William Miller and Sagon Penn. On 24 July 1999, Dubose, a Notre Dame Alumnus and former NFL player, was

⁵¹ Mitchy Slick, "Too Ghetto" *XXL Guns and Ammo Vol. 3* (2004)

⁵² Information gathered from over four years of personal relationship with Jermaine Simpson (Complex).

⁵³ Complex featuring Big Will, "SDPDK," *West Coast MC'n* (2004)

shot twelve times by the police, including five bullets in the back. While Miller, a 42 year-old mentally disabled man, was shot to death by the San Diego police for reportedly hitting people with a stick on 8 February 2000.⁵⁴ Interestingly, Miller was not Black but many people felt that his status of being homeless and mentally disabled rendered him non-white and undesirable.⁵⁵ Similarly, Big Will asked, “They killed ‘Homeless Joe’ for carrying a stick; he [wasn’t] a threat to a pinky toe. What the fuck? Do you shoot first and ask questions later? What makes your life greater than the average couch potato?”⁵⁶ Big Will concludes, by saying if the police attempt to assault him, he would use force to protect himself echoing the case of Sagon Penn.

Sagon Penn is nothing less than a folk-hero for Blacks in San Diego and other parts of California. On 31 March 1985, Penn was pulled by officers Thomas Riggs and Donovan Jacobs of the San Diego Police because he “fit the description” of an armed gang member they were looking for. However, the 23 year-old Penn was not a gang member and unarmed yet the officers continued to harass Penn. Penn decided to walk away. While he was walking away, Officer Jacobs attacked Penn, a well trained martial artist, from the back. In self-defense, Penn began to wrestle with Jacobs. During the scuffle Penn grabbed a hold of Jacobs’ pistol and fired shots at Jacobs, Riggs and Sara Pena-Ruiz a civilian ride-along. Pena-Ruiz and Jacobs were injured while Riggs died.

⁵⁴ David Washburn, David Hasemeyer and Mark Arner, “A question of force – Dealing with multiple shooters has been a ‘huge’ issue, former San Diego chief says” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 19 January 2003. Victor A. Patton, “Some question the point of the city’s effort to publicly release reviews of police shootings,” *San Diego CityBeat*, 4 September 2001.

⁵⁵ Kelly Thornton, “When should cops shoot? Answer is far from simple,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 22 February 2000.

⁵⁶ Complex and Big Will.

Penn's trial was taken to court where he was found to be acting in self-defense.⁵⁷ It was also found that Riggs and Jacobs had a long history of biased policing. Unfortunately, despite his acquittal Penn experienced continuous harassment from the police. On 4 July 2002, Penn committed suicide. Penn's family and pastor were saddened and essentially felt his life had been forever changed by from the shooting incident in 1985 and expressed sympathy for him. Contrarily, Bill Farrar, president of the San Diego Police Officer's Association declared, "The world is better off without him."⁵⁸

This case was larger than Penn and the San Diego Police Department. It was the summation of decades of loose-gripped policies that turned a blind eye to possible infractions as long as "bad guys" were brought in. As explained earlier, these policies did not simply intimidate criminals. The Demetrius Dubose, William Miller and Sagon Penn cases and countless others all work as examples of how entire populations experienced the over-policing of their bodies and space.

Most San Diego rappers, like Complex, have followed in the tradition established over twenty years ago by Gangsta Ern (as well as NWA and Ice Cube in the Los Angeles area) and questioned the history of biased policing. Mitchy Slick has frequently used his songs to question the legality of gang injunctions. On "Police", a collaboration with Damu and Tiny Doo, Mitch rapped, "In the ghetto, you're labeled a member/Documented prematurely just in case so they could remember...A nigga hear the cops say freeze so much, he feel like a muthafuckin' popsicle."⁵⁹ Slick suggests that it is not just the laws but the culture of policing that sets San Diego apart from other places, "He grew up in Santee where they still string niggas up...Nigga

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Fitzsimmons, "Sagon Penn found dead in apparent suicide," *San Diego Union-Tribune* 5 July 2002.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Mitchy Slick and Damu featuring Tiny Doo, "Police" *Strong Arm Robbery* (2005).

this is Daygo, where the police knew they wanted to be police when they was still in elementary/These redneck muthafuckas be like, “Fuck getting’ a payoff, clack the gavel on his ass, make the nigga do a century.”⁶⁰ Similarly, Ric Nutt, a Wrongkind and Lincoln member, conveyed his struggles with the justice system in “Trying to Strike Me”, a tale of how a routine traffic stop turned into him doing three years in prison on a gun charge because the person he was driving with was a parolee released from prison on a “Fourth Amendment waiver.”⁶¹

San Diego artists have used their albums to warn also warn the younger generation about the results of lives of crime. As it was mentioned earlier, San Diego rap tends to be produced by older members; hence these artists have used their lyrics to reach the younger generation. As Black Mikey stated, “We became griots. We became oral traditionists. We spoke about things that went on in the past that we learned. We speak about things that’s going on now. And we speak about the future. So now, this hip-hop thing is taking on a whole different turn.”⁶² While working with youth offenders, Complex has noticed that he has been able to further reach the youth when they realize he is Complex and not just Jermaine Simpson.

Slick, on this first album *Triggeration Station*, certainly used this album to signify and toast his neighborhood and also boast about his past. But he interestingly decided to end his album with the song “Young Homies” where he paid homage to the people that came before him and warned the young gang members about the seriousness of gang life. At the end of the track Stacy “Big Stay Soft” Butler, a former member of the infamous Lincoln Park Syndo Mob, warned younger members about getting into gang life.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ric Nutt, “Trying to Strike Me,” *Triple Triv Bootlegs & B-Sides* (2008)

⁶²“Black Mikey & San Diego Rap History.”

Mitchy has consistently attempted to convey this message on his albums. On his first mixtape *XXL GUNS & AMMO VOL. 1* he recorded a track titled, “Young Homie on The Run.” This track was actually directed at a young companion of Slick’s that was a fugitive from justice. Slick began that song by dedicating the album, “To all my little niggas out here bangin’ in the streets,” and added, “If you got a gun and you wavin’ that motherfucka around nigga, you better be prepared to get your ass shot.” Slick then went on to tell the story of a young man almost born into the gang life, “his momma was a hoodrat, his pop was one of the set’s vets,” Slick stated. Since this young man Slick rapped about had never been to jail and was still young, his naiveté led him down a destructive path. Slick states, “He never been to the pen so he ain’t even knowin’ that he Cali judicial system got something real for him, something ill for him, they’ll fuck around and railroad him.” Slick recently continued this trend with the song, “He’ll Shoot” and “15 Bricks” which are both stories of young men socialized into gang life. While Slick rarely takes any moral position, his songs still tend to suggest that older members have influenced the younger generation of gang members.

Similarly, Damu, criticized “older homies” stating, “Like Scarface, no women and kids...If yo’ big homie tells you it’s bool to shoot that lady, he a ho. I bet he don’t wanna go one-on-one wit’ a real g, he gon’ try to tell his little homies to kill me. And tell you how his buster ass used to be gangsta, that nigga’s a bitch, but he’s always flamed up. You looking up to Blood but Blood be kissin’ asses, I ain’t a hall monitor, so ain’t no more passes.”

While the death of Tupac Shakur in Las Vegas and Notorious BIG in Los Angeles, in 1996 and 1997, caused a decline of the commercial popularity of West Coast hip hop, the concepts and themes Southern California gangsta rap made popular have been appropriated by rappers from other parts of the United States—such as Atlanta, New Orleans and New York (a

place that once disregarded gangsta rap as signaling the death of hip hop). This has proven to be a point of frustration for San Diego rappers especially. Slick raised this concept in the track “The Industry” where he states, “The industry just ain’t for Gs, we mix it with the streets, now we got bi-coastal beef.” Instead of signing San Diego rappers who talk about more than glorifying gangs, in recent years, East Coast rappers have gained popularity imitating California life. Complex noted that at least, “for the last five years niggas been tryna imitate us.”⁶³ For this reason in his song he stated:

Yo since Pac died
Everybody and they mama been tryna ride
Wit tattoos and bandanas, Yall soft like bananas,
Put your shirt back on, you bird chest ass nigga
Corny ass, wanna be from the West ass nigga,
We been thuggin’ and bangin’
We been hustlin’ and ballin’,
Been doin’ it for decades, yall skills musta been fallin,
Now you all about chips and tight whips
But every thing yall talking about
Started out with the Bloods and the Crips⁶⁴

Mitchy Slick, in “The Industry”, also commented on the absurdity of mainstream rappers wearing bandanas and other gang clothing that they know nothing about—from people not correctly wearing khaki suits to wearing bandanas that people have died over just because they match their shoes. However, the ultimate frustration is echoed in “Too Ghetto” where Slick, Tiny Doo and Don Diego express the possibility that they are “too ghetto for the industry”. Don Diego’s verse best expressed the frustration when he rapped:

In the SE, if you ain’t got fifty gs on the B/Seem like this music industry, sweep yo’ shit right up under the street/Let’s take my shit for instance homey, It’s crackin’ and y’all know it/But I can’t afford Dre attention, so I ain’t got shit to show for it/Yet and still I feel niggas gon’ feel my shit, feel me?/It’s either that, back to the pen, or some young nigga goin’ kill me/I ain’t no prophet, I ain’t no rapper, I’m a penitentiary nigga that bang/With some pimpin’ in him, that’ll rap for the change...lord knows while on the

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

block, I pray to God not to get shot/But is that what its gonna take to get a big break, like 50 Cent got?”

Unfortunately, Don Diego never got the chance to find commercial success, he was sent to prison in 2007.

Conclusion

Gangsta rap has allowed for otherwise unemployable young Black men to make a legal living, criticize the status quo and hope for a better future for their associates in Black San Diego. Some artists have struggled to make a living while others have struggled with having their personal lives match what they aspire to on records. Mitchy Slick, Cricet, Damu, Black Mikey and others have found reasonable success. Complex, a college graduate with no record was able to make the decision to leave the rap game and focus on his career, while others like Gangsta Ern died you (and his death has sparked many tribute songs like the Hound Foundation’s “Homie”). Gangsta rap has not ended the gang wars—even though the death rate has dropped significantly, it tends to flare up. On 30 April 2011, San Diego rapper Cutthroat aka Lil Bay Loc (an NHC member) was killed after unknown gunmen fired over 30 rounds into his car. When I was informed of the news, my first thought was, “Why don’t some of these rappers play a proactive role in thwarting the recent string of shootings in Southeast?” My question was recently answered; local rappers have planned a 13 May 2011 show entitled “Stop the Violence/Put down the Gun, Pick up the Mic”. Black Mikey, Problumz and other local rappers will perform in hopes of helping to curve the violence. The effects of this movement have yet to be seen but one thing is for sure: If San Diego is going to overcome the history of violence, following the lead of local emcees and reaching beyond the boundaries that divide San Diegans is a start.