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Rappers sounded warning. By: Light, Alan. Rolling Stone. 7/9/92-7/23/92, Issue 634/635, p15. 3p. 3 Color Photographs. Abstract: Suggests that rap music predicted the April riots in Los Angeles as far back as the early 1980s, and asserts that rap music is the only source available to communicate the attitudes of inner-city America to the white mainstream. Predictions of Ice-T and Public Enemy's Chuck D; Raps' link to the Reagan-Bush era of American politics; The brutality of the police which is echoed in many rap songs, such as Cypress Hill's 'Pigs,' Public Enemy's 'Anti-Nigger Machine' and others. (AN: 9207130063)

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RAPPERS SOUNDED WARNING

The violence in Los Angeles didn't surprise those who were paying attention

WHEN THE RODNEY KING videotape first surfaced, in March of 1991, Ice-T wasn't surprised. "I've been yelling about the police for so long," he said. "I used to come out and say, 'I hate the police,' and people would say, 'Oh, he's just trying to be tough,' but I've been on the other end of that stick in real life.

"Rappers are really ahead of our time," Ice-T went on. "We're predictors; we attempt to foresee what's going to happen." The writer of "Escape From the Killing Fields" and "Cop Killer" added: "The next time they do something like that, motherfuckers need to get busy. People say, 'You don't need to be violent,' but sometimes it takes some kind of action."

Just over a year after that conversation, when the verdict in the King case triggered one of the most violent riots in American history, Ice-T still wasn't surprised. "It's kind of a vindicating day for me, because anyone can say that I read it," he said. "My answer to what happened [in the riots] is 'Refer to album 3, track 5.' What do I think about the police? See album 4, track 2."

To hear George Bush tell it, the Los Angeles riots were the result of the local black community's shock after being blindsided by the King decision - along with, of course, a decay in its "family values." But in fact, as Ice-T's comments indicate, the verdict was not so much a surprise as it was conclusive evidence of beliefs already well established in black America. It wasn't news in South Central that the police had assaulted a black man, nor was it anything new when the officers responsible were not punished for it. This was not an isolated event; it was the last straw. As Public Enemy's Chuck D put it, "The verdict was like dropping a match on a pool of gasoline."

But it's easy to understand why this expression of rage came as such a surprise to our president. Before the riots, only one source was available to communicate the attitudes of inner-city America to the

white mainstream. That source was rap music. Aside from such powerful hip-hop-influenced films as *Boyz n the Hood*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn* and *Do the Right Thing*, nowhere else in the national media are such issues as police brutality, racism and the unrelenting horrors of urban violence discussed on a regular basis.

Chuck D has called rap "black America's CNN," an alternative network through which black youth can share ideas, fashion, slang and politics. But as the riots and the subsequent response made clear, the ratings still aren't high enough, particularly among those people who determine laws, social programs and our nation's direction.

RAP IS INEXTRICABLY LINKED TO THE Reagan-Bush era of American politics. The first rap hit - "Rapper's Delight," by the Sugarhill Gang - was released in 1979 as Ronald Reagan was campaigning for office. In 1982, in the middle of Reagan's first term, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released "The Message" and injected social realism into rap's party rhymes. A vivid, terrifying portrait of ghetto life, the song built to a chorus that would still be relevant, even prophetic, ten years later: "It's like a jungle/Sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under. . . . Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge/I'm trying not to lose my head." After that, rap was firmly established as this era's most overtly political style. It is no coincidence that as the social policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations took hold, the voices of rap grew increasingly angry.

In 1986, with the records of Philadelphia's Schoolly-D and New York's Boogie Down Productions, the stakes were raised with a more violent, unapologetically street-centered style that would come to be known as "gangsta rap." The next year, Public Enemy introduced a militant political component to rap's mix with titles like "Rightstarter (Message to a Black Man)" and such lyrics as "Some ask us why we act the way we act/Without looking how long they kept us back." Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, former street criminal Ice-T was fusing these attitudes with the continuing gang dominance of his city. He codified L.A.'s gangsta style with such tracks as "Colors" when he rapped: "My life is violent, but violence is life/Peace is a dream, reality is a knife."

In 1988, N.W.A (Niggas With Attitude) released *Straight Outta Compton*, a bomb blast of the fury and frustration of urban male youth. With titles such as "Dopeman" and even, unbelievably at the time, "Fuck tha Police," the songs were brutal, unexpurgated, almost cinematic reports from the front lines of the L.A. ghettos. After *Compton*, rap witnessed a gangsta explosion, a barrage of guns, sex and hostility that was no less than white America's worst nightmare (proved when the FBI sent a "warning letter" to N.W.A's record company after getting wind of "Fuck tha Police").

The selective brutality of the police has been an especially pervasive theme in rap for many years. Boogie Down Productions put it most succinctly in a rhyme addressed to the police titled "Who Protects Us From You?" But there are countless other examples, including:

N.W.A's "Fuck tha Police": "Some police think/They have the authority to kill a minority." And "Sa

Prize (Part 2)": ``The police don't want peace/They want a nigger deceased."

Cypress Hill's ``Pigs": ``This pig harassed the whole neighborhood/This pig worked at the station/This pig killed my homeboy/So the fucking pig went on vacation."

Public Enemy's ``Anti-Nigger Machine": ``Instead of peace, the police/Just want to wreck and flex."

From Houston's Geto Boys (``Police brutality is now a formality/They're kicking our ass and we're paying their salary," from ``City Under Siege") to Seattle's Sir Mix-a-Lot (``I'm hip to the cop procedure/They get you everytime they see you/They stop you, they cuff you, they roll you and they rough you," from ``One Time's Got No Case"), police harassment of urban blacks has been addressed by rappers from sea to shining sea. Pop superstar L.L. Cool J dedicated his police brutality song ``Illegal Search" to ``the cops out there that did the wrong thing to one of my brothers in Jersey."

One of the most chilling records to listen to in the wake of the L.A. riots is 2Pac's ``Trapped." Tupac Shakur is a member of Digital Underground and starred in this year's controversial film Juice. Just prior to the record's release last year, Shakur himself was assaulted by a police officer. Now, however, ``Trapped" assumes an even more devastating resonance. The narrator describes his neighborhood as a jail cell, a world in which he ``can barely walk the city streets/Without a cop stopping me, searching me, then asking my identity." Frustrated and furious, he finally strikes back. To those who question his violent response, Tupac sounds a call that would echo through the streets of South Central: ``How can I feel guilty after all the things they did to me?/Sweated me, hunted me, trapped in my own community/One day I'm going to bust, blow up on this society/Why did you lie to me?/I can't find a trace of equality."

None of the songs quoted here are obscure or hidden. Almost all of them come from gold- or platinum-selling albums. Millions of people have been listening to these ominous warnings for years. Yet not only have few in power heeded these words, rap is still commonly dismissed as a fad or a hateful noise. Metallica's James Hetfield recently said that rap is just ``blacks [saying], ``We want everything, we deserve it, give it to us, you fucked up this and that,' and that kind of shit." Some, like actor and mobster sycophant Mickey Rourke, have accused rappers and filmmakers Spike Lee and John Singleton of glorifying violence and blamed them for indirectly causing the riots.

Why are so many so eager to dismiss or ignore this music? Undeniably, it is loud and aggressive; its language is often profane; and sometimes it descends into racism, homophobia and misogyny. There is a wide range of rap stylings out there, and some of it is irresponsible or pandering. Finally, though, the attacks come because this is a music that is unabashedly, proudly black, and nothing can alarm a white audience faster. As Ice Cube wrote: ``They say we promote gangs and drugs/You want to sweep a nigger like me up under the rug."

But the L.A. riots proved that the content of these records, no matter how ugly, cannot be ignored so easily - or without a devastating cost. It should now be obvious to all that rappers are reporting real events and not just striking tough-guy poses. When so many artists continue to sound the same alarm, it is time to acknowledge that they aren't simply making these things up. but They're basing their

accusations on personal experience - events that happened to them or their friends or associates - not to mention more public outrages, like the police killings of Michael Stewart and Eleanor Bumpurs, in New York. How many rappers from how many different quarters must point out the realities of urban violence before the public will accept that describing these horrors is not the same thing as glorifying them?

Ice Cube came under fire for "Black Korea," on his recent album *Death Certificate*. The track is addressed to Korean shop owners and warns them to "pay respect to the black fist/Or we'll burn your store right down to a crisp." One can argue with Ice Cube's conclusions or his language, but no one who had heard the album could claim to have been surprised when tensions between the black and Korean communities erupted in Los Angeles.

Such topics, however, are virtually invisible in the mainstream national media. As documented in Andrew Hacker's compelling new study of race in America, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, journalism remains one of the professional fields in which blacks continue to suffer from the greatest underrepresentation. How many black faces did you see reporting from L.A. during the riots? It's no wonder distrust of the press is so rampant among the hip-hop generation; rap has risen to fill this vacuum in the dissemination of information. "Rap is media control," says Chuck D. "Everything else in the world, if it's about the black situation, it comes to you from another perspective."

When George Bush was asked after the riots if he knew who Ice Cube was, he said, "No, I've never heard of them, but I know that rap is the music where it rhymes." Well, yes - it is music that rhymes, that makes listeners laugh and dance and rhyme along. But it is also a music that makes its audience think and tells the truth about the world - their world, a place they don't see represented anywhere else.

A new study of 700 black teenagers from the East Coast and California, titled "Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation," reveals that rappers are the only public figures still respected by black youth, the only potential role models left. As Ice-T points out, there's also a new generation of white kids listening to rap and being exposed to a minority perspective for the first time: "They're saying: 'Hold up, these rappers are talking to me, and it's making me understand. Why did John Wayne always win? Weren't we taking that land from the Indians? Haven't we been kind of fucked-up to people?' They're starting to figure it out."

PHOTO: Ice Cube (LARRY FORD/OUTLINE)

PHOTO: Ice-T: The riots were "vindicating." (BRIAN SMITH/OUTLINE)

PHOTO: N.W.A. (clockwise from top left): MC Ren, Yella, Eazy-E and Dr. Dre (NEAL PRESTON/OUTLINE)

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By Alan Light

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