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## Rap, Cops, and Crime: Clarifying the "Cop Killer" Controversy

Perhaps the most enduring feature of the ACJS [Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences] is that it routinely brings practitioners and researchers together in a public forum where they can debate the current state of criminal justice. In this spirit, we offer a counterpoint to the attacks made by Dennis R. Martin, President of the National Association of Chiefs of Police, on rapper Ice-T's song "Cop Killer" and its alleged relationship to violent acts ("The Music of Murder," *ACJS Today*, Nov/Dec 1993).

### "Cop Killer" in Cultural Context

As a starting point, Martin offers a truncated and distorted description of rap's gestation that largely misses the music's social and cultural meanings. To suggest, as does Martin, that rap is "a culmination of the course charted by Elvis Presley" is to commit a double fallacy. First, Martin's characterization of Elvis Presley as the founder of rock 'n' roll, and Bill Haley as "the country's first composer of rock and roll," constitutes a racist and revisionist rock history which curiously excludes Louis Jordan, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and a host of other black musicians and musical traditions which established the essentials of rock 'n' roll. (This sort of myopic ethnic insensitivity echoes in Martin's subsequent claim that rap is "primitive" (!) music.)

Second, Martin compounds these sorts of mistakes by tracing rap's lineage to rock 'n' roll—or, apparently, white Southern rockabilly. Rap artists have in fact explicitly denied this lineage. Early rappers, for example, sang "no more rock 'n' roll," and rappers Public Enemy have attacked Elvis Presley, and his racist attitudes, specifically. To draw a parallel between white Southern rockabilly of the mid-1950's and today's black urban rap is therefore analogous to comparing Joshua's trumpets at the battle of Jericho with the Wagnerian operas of Nazi storm troopers, or to equating the horn-calls which led Caesar's troops into England with the thrash metal of Slaughter and Megadeth absorbed by US Air Force pilots prior to bombing raids during the Persian Gulf War. Other than to say that militaries have routinely used music to lead soldiers into battle, the

analogies have little heuristic value

~~What Martin's analysis lacks is the crucial historical specificity and sociological contextualization, the framework of conceptual clarity and appreciation necessary to explain the complex relationship between particular forms of music, popular culture dynamics, and incidents of violence.~~

Most commentators, in fact, locate the beginnings of rap (or, more broadly, hip-hop) in the funkadelic period of the mid-late 1970s, à la George Clinton, Parliament, P-Funk, Kurtis Blow, and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Evolving from this musical base, rap gained its popular appeal in the grim ghettos of New York City—first in the Bronx, and then in Harlem and Brooklyn. Rap caught the sounds of the city, capturing the aggressive boasts and stylized threats of street-tough black males. By the mid-1980s, rap was injected into the American mainstream via Run-D.M.C.'s version of Aerosmith's "Walk this Way" and other cross-over hits. MC Hammer, Tone Loc, Public Enemy, Ice-T, NWA (Niggers with Attitude), De La Soul, and a legion of others soon followed, infusing rap with R and B, jazz, and other influences, and introducing rap to world-wide audiences of all ethnicities.

In ignoring this rich history, Martin misunderstands both the aesthetics and the politics of rap. Martin, for example, leaps to the extraordinary conclusion that rap is a "vile and dangerous" form of cultural expression, a "primitive music" that attacks "every shared value that has bound our society together for more than two-hundred years." From within this sort of uncritical, consensus model of contemporary society, Martin then locates this portentous social threat in a wider cultural crisis. "[T]he trend in American rock music for the last decade," he argues, "has been to promote ever more vile, deviant, and sociopathic behaviors." And if this trend is not reversed, Martin concludes, "every American is at risk of losing his [sic] property and his life to criminals." A careful analysis of rock's lyrical diversity and social effects would, of course, undermine these sorts of hysterical generalizations. A careful analysis of rap music's lyrical content and cultural context likewise reveals a very different social dynamic.

"Message Rap" (or "Gangster Rap," the focus of the remainder of this essay) deals head-on with universal themes of injustice and oppression—themes which have both bound and divided US society from its inception. But at the same time, gangster rap is proudly localized as "ghetto music," thematizing its commitment to the black urban experience. (This is also, by the way, part of what constitutes rap's appeal for millions of middle-class white kids who have never been inside a black ghetto.) In fact, rap focuses on aspects of ghetto life that most adult whites, middle-class blacks, and self-protective police officers and politicians would rather ignore. Rappers record the everyday experiences of pimping, prostitution, child abandonment, AIDS, and drugs (as in Ice-T's anti-drug song, "I'm Your Pusher"). Other rappers deal with deeper institutionalized problems such as poverty, racial conflict, revisionist history books, the demand for trivial consumer goods, the exploitation of disenfranchised blacks through military service, and black dislocation from Africa. And still other rap songs lay bare the desperate and often violent nature of ghetto life, as played out

in individual and collective fear, sadly misogynistic and homophobic fantasies, street killings, and, significantly, oppressive harassment by police patrols.

These themes are packed in the aesthetic of black ghetto life, an aesthetic which features verbal virtuosity as a powerful symbol in the negotiation of social status. Rap is developed from US and Jamaican verbal street games like "signifying," "the dozens," and "toasting." Rap in turn encases this verbal jousting in the funky beat of rhythms reworked through the formal musical devices which give birth to the rap sound: "sampling," "scratch mixing," and "punch phrasing" (hardly the "primitive" or "stripped" music which Martin describes). The result of this complex artistic process is a sensual, bad-assed gangster who "won't be happy till the dancers are wet, out of control" and wildly "possessed" by the rapper's divine right to rhyme the ironies, ambiguities, and fears of urban ghetto life (Ice-T, "Hit the Deck"). Musically, rap certainly emerges more from studio funk and street poetry than the blues; but like Sonny Boy Williamson, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon and a host of other great postwar US bluesmen, Ice-T and other rappers twist and shout from within a world of crippling adversity.

### "Cop Killer" on Trial

Because he misses this cultural context, it is no surprise that Martin attempts to "kill the messenger" by attacking rap music as itself a social problem. His choicest blows are saved for Ice-T, whose album *Body Count* integrates rap and "metal" styling, and includes a trilogy of protest sirens on police brutality written "for every pig who ever beat a brother down": "Smoked Pork," "Out in the Parking Lot," and "Cop Killer." Martin argues that one of these, "Cop Killer," is a "misuse of the First Amendment" because it has been "implicated in at least two shooting incidents and has inflamed racial tensions in cities across the country."

Here, though, is the available evidence on "Cop Killer": Since its release in early 1992, an unknown number of persons have heard the song. Martin claims that Time-Warner shipped 500,000 copies of *Body Count* upon its initial release. This number is important because subsequent pressings of *Body Count* did not contain "Cop Killer." It was pulled by Time-Warner after US Vice-President Dan Quayle, Parents' Music Resource Center spokeswoman and future Vice-Presidential associate Tipper Gore, and a host of influential media personalities and "moral entrepreneurs" leveled a highly organized and well-publicized campaign of "moral panic" against the song (see Becker, 1963; Cohen, 1972).

But our repeated inquiries to Time-Warner revealed that no such sales figures are available. We were told that Ice-T has since left Time-Warner and is now under contract with Profile records. Yet Profile cannot document sales figures for the first *Body Count* album either, claiming that these figures are known only to Ice-T himself—who, despite our attempts to reach him, remains unavailable for comment. We simply don't know—and neither does Martin—how many young Americans have heard "Cop Killer."

Setting all this aside, let's assume that the President of the National Association of Chiefs of Police is correct: some 500,000 persons have heard "Cop Killer" via the music recording industry. Because popular music is a highly contagious commodity (especially among the young), we may cautiously estimate that three times that number have listened to this song (each buyer sharing the song with just two others). From this very conservative estimate, then, it is not unreasonable to conclude that at least 1.5 million young Americans have heard "Cop Killer."

According to Martin, 144 US police officers were killed in the line of duty during 1992. This is indeed a tragic fact, the seriousness of which we do not wish in any way to diminish. But the fact also remains that there is no evidence to show that the perpetrators of these 144 homicides were influenced by "Cop Killer." Martin bases his argument on a brief review of four juveniles arrested in Las Vegas (NV) for wounding two police officers with firearms, allegedly behind the emotional impetus of "Cop Killer." Put another way, while some 1.5 million persons may have listened to this song, only four may have acted on its message. Thankfully, none were successful.

In summary, Martin claims that "Ice-T's *Cop Killer* [sic] gave [the Las Vegas youths] a sense of duty and purpose, to get even with a f-king pig." If so, we should expect this same "sense of duty and purpose" to influence the behavior of some of the other 1.5 million listeners. Martin, in fact, describes popular music as "a tool to destabilize a democratic society by provoking civil unrest, violence, and murder," and argues that "the lyrics of rapper Ice-T's 'Cop Killer' do precisely that . . .". He further notes the "predictability of police being ambushed after such a rousing call-to-arms . . .". But we cannot, in fact, find another "predictable" case. The relationship between listening to "Cop Killer" and committing subsequent acts of violence appears to more closely resemble a statistical accident than a causal equation. (The probability of attacking a police officer with a loaded firearm after listening to "Cop Killer" is, according to Martin's count, less than 1 in 375,000). Treating this relationship as one of cause and effect therefore not only misrepresents the issues; it intentionally engineers self-serving moral panic around rap music, and obstructs solutions to the sorts of problems which rap portrays.

## "Cop Killer," Culture, and Crime

Ice-T is not the first artist to embed a "cop killer" theme in United States popular culture. This theme has been the subject of countless cinematic and literary works, and has appeared many times before in popular music. During the Great Depression, for example, musicians celebrated Pretty Boy Floyd and his exploits, which included the murder of law enforcement personnel. Similarly, the highly respected fiddler Tommy Jarrell wrote and sang "Policeman," which begins, "Policeman come and I didn't want to go this morning, so I shot him in the head with my 44." But perhaps the best-known case is Eric Clapton's cover version of Bob Marley and the Wailers' "I Shot the Sheriff," which reached

the top of the US music charts in the mid-1970s (a feat not approached by Ice-T). "I Shot the Sheriff," though, never suffered the sort of moral and political condemnation leveled at "Cop Killer." How do we account for this difference?

First, "I Shot the Sheriff" was released by a white artist, and in an era when the availability and allure of firearms and ammunition had not reached the saturation point we see today. Clapton's white bread portrayal of an armed and heroic Jamaican "rudeboy" was therefore comfortably abstract and romantic. In contrast, Ice-T's shotgun-toting black US gangster is all too concrete, stripped of romantic pretense and lodged uncomfortably in everyday life. Firearms and ammunition are now prevalent in the black community, and are the leading cause of death among young black males. Within the context of gangster rap, artists like Ice-T portray, with chilling clarity, this tragic obsession with lethal weapons.

Second, the social aesthetic of rap music creates a key cultural and political difference. Because rap constitutes a strident form of cultural combat and critique, it generates in response organized censorship, blacklisting, arrests, and the police-enforced cancellation of concerts. Rap's cultural roots and primary audience are among the impoverished, minority residents of US inner cities. While many of these citizens are unable or unwilling to speak out—for lack of access to cultural channels, for fear of reprisal—rappers invoke a militant black pride, and portray and confront social injustice in ways that threaten the complacent status quo of mainstream society. And as part of this critique, rappers lay bare the daily reality of police violence against minority populations, and remind us how many Rodney Kings haven't made it onto videotape.

For these reasons, Dennis Martin and other defenders of the status quo are loath to acknowledge or appreciate rap on any level—as innovative music, verbal virtuosity, or cultural critique. In fact, their discomfort with rap's politics intertwines with their displeasure over its style and sound. Gangster rap is frequently raunchy, sometimes violent, and often played loud, with a heavy emphasis on the staccato, thumping back beat. By artistic design, it is meant to be "in your face" and threatening. This, in combination with the evocative power of rap's imagery, generates loud and urgent condemnations of rap from those who benefit, directly and indirectly, from contemporary social arrangements. For them, personal offense becomes a measure of political superiority.

Finally, the remarkable attention given to "Cop Killer" reflects a growing concern, among both criminologists and the general public, over the intersections of popular culture and crime. Our own studies in this area have led us to conclude that contemporary music can in some cases be significantly linked to criminality—but only when particular forms of music take on meaning within the dynamics of specific subcultures like neo-Nazi skinheads (Hamm, 1993) or hip-hop graffiti artists (Ferrell, 1993). And in this regard, we end by commending Martin for an important discovery. The fact that four youths may have in fact used the cultural material of "Cop Killer" as an epistemic and aesthetic framework for attacking two police officers is cause for serious criminological concern. And to demonstrate *how* this song may have changed the social and political consciousness of these would-be cop killers, within the dynamics of their

own subcultural arrangements, is of paramount importance for understanding the situated social meanings of gangster rap.

But this sort of research requires something more than Martin offers in his essay. It demands an attention to ethnographic particulars, in place of Martin's wide generalizations and blanket condemnations. It calls for a sort of criminological *verstehen*, a willingness to pay careful attention to the lyrics of gangster rap and to the lives of those who listen to it, in place of Martin's dismissive disregard. Ultimately, it requires that criminologists confront and critique the kinds of social injustices which rap exposes, rather than participating, as does Martin, in their perpetuation.