

A Crate of Records is like a History Book

William Eric Perkins

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[See table of contents](#)

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REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

A Crate of Records is like a History Book

William Eric Perkins

Brian Cross, ed., *It's Not About a Salary ... Rap, Race & Resistance in Los Angeles* (London: Verso 1993).

THIS IS AN IMPORTANT BOOK documenting one of the least-understood chapters in the history and evolution of hip-hop culture: the emergence of rap and hip-hop in the *City of Quartz* — Los Angeles. Brian Cross, photo editor for *Rappages* and a leading hip-hop journalist, has provided a rich account of hip-hop's birth on the West Coast. Following a lengthy introduction, Cross provides a wide range of interviews with LA-based hip-hop personalities from the earliest break dancers down to the current crop of post-gangsta', post-rebellion rappers such as Warren D and the Freestyle Fellowship. More than a history and popular ethnography of the music, style, and culture of Los Angeles, it is a stunning portrait of life in the post-industrial metropolis. Here is his early description of Black Los Angeles:

If Clinton ran the 1992 presidential election in an attempt to prevent this generation from becoming the first to fare worse than their parents, his message seemed ironic in south central LA where the last two generations have seen the evacuation of the middle class, and the departure of good jobs, leaving the boom industries of retailing crack cocaine and mortuary services. (31)

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The southern California landscape so often associated with sun, surf, Hollywood, and boom times has crash-landed. The coastal state has suffered from a host of interrelated factors that have decimated its economy and altered its social fabric. First, proposition 13, which initiated the tax revolt policies of the Reagan era, exacted its original toll in California, where the dismantling of the "Great Society" took its first victims. The second major factor radically affecting California's economy has been the steady and recent steep decline in military spending, upon which one-quarter of the state's industry depended. Increasing immigration from Asia, Central America, and, of course, Mexico, constituted a third influence on the state. Declining tax revenues and the deindustrialization of the economy has conditioned this immigrant experience in particularly unfortunate ways, placing unforeseen burdens on social services, labour markets, and urban planning. Los Angeles (or "Lost" Angeles) has moved from a city of glitz and glamour to the capital of an American internal "Third World," overtaking New York in its infinite diversity.

It is against this economic and demographic nightmare that "hip-hop" emerged in Los Angeles. Fuelled by the "... hip-hop aesthetic of making producers from consumers ..." (20), LA rappers developed in the same places as those of New York — schoolyards, parks, and small clubs. But the vastness of California and the contentious claims to its public space have given rappers the title of new messiahs, transforming an urban wasteland into a cultural possibility for 'hip.' Cross documents the origins of the rap style by exploring a variety of sources. The Watts Writers' Workshop, started by screenwriter and playwright Bud Schulberg, showcased the performance poets of the Black Power revolution during the late 1960s and 1970s, a milieu which fused the tradition of "playing the dozens" (signifyin' in ghetto vernacular) and "toastin' and boastin'" with the more formal rules of academic poetry. Emerging from this distinctly cultural flowering of Black Power, came the Watts Prophets, the West Coast equivalent of Harlem's The Last Poets. They developed powerful message raps, set against a minimalist musical background of conga drums and bass, which aimed to raise the consciousness of the masses. The Watts Prophets were to be a major influence on west coast rappers. "Rapper's Delight" by the Sugar Hill Gang galvanized the emerging "hip" California scene in 1980, and was followed by widespread touring of New York hip-hop proponents. One of the godfathers of rap, Afrika Bambaataa, came to Los Angeles in this period, and was followed by the breakdancing posse, The Rocksteady crew, in 1982. Surprisingly, the New York B-boys were met head on by a distinct Los Angeles dance style known as "poppin' and lockin'" (popping is based on the moves of a robot, while locking was a specialized adaptation of Rufus Thomas' famous dance, the funky chicken, which is marked by the locking of the joints). Cross also devotes considerable attention to several other factors that moulded Los Angeles rap — the fascination with the technology of the video arcade game and the post-disco electronic sound of the German band Kraftwerk (post-disco electro-

pop was also a major influence on East Coast rappers). This is an important revelation since the musical sampling of LA rap is filled with the infinite permutations of electronic synthesizers duplicating galaxies of sound.

Cross' second major discovery is to identify and document the sources for the genre called "gangsta' rap." Though there were other gangsta' rappers (Philadelphia's Schooly D being the most prominent), it was in Los Angeles, particularly in the communities of south central, Compton and Long Beach, that the genre reached maturity. Gangsta' rap is but one of the responses to the deproletarianization of much of Black and Chicano Los Angeles. One of its primary sources comes from the "ghetto literature" of Iceberg Slim. His works *Pimp* and *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim* established the player (mack or pimp) life-style as one to be imitated. Then there are the *blaxploitation* film characters, Dolemite and Blowfly, whose loquacious soliloquies on the life, done in classical ghetto narrative style, were major influences on LA rappers. Ice T, borrowing his name to define his own hip-hop personality, pays homage to Iceberg Slim on his first album, *Rhyme Pays*, where the player's life is celebrated.

Another source of the gangsta' style was the emergence of southern California youth gangs, including the mega-gangs, the Bloods and the Crips. The flowering of gang life and culture has had a noticeable influence on LA and the "hip-hop" scene. Here is how Mike Davis summarizes the gang style:

The 'them' — what a local mayor calls the Viet Cong abroad in our society — are the members of local Black gangs, segmented into several hundred fighting 'sets' while loosely aligned into two hostile super-gangs, the 'Crips' and the 'Bloods' — universally distinguished, as every view of Dennis Hopper's *Colors* now knows, by their color-coding of shoelaces, T-shirts and bandannas (red for Bloods, blue for Crips). In the official version which Hollywood is incessantly reheating and further sensationalizing, these gangs comprise veritable guerilla armies organized for the sale of crack and outgunning the police with huge arsenals of Uzi and Mac-20 automatics.¹

Gangsta' rappers have borrowed heavily from this gang form, lyrically advocating extreme violence, misogyny, the street life, the chronic (marijuana) and crack, as well as all of the negative behaviours associated with gang culture. The adoption of the gangsta' style mimics society. OG's (original gangstas') are implored to turn rappers into SG's (studio gangsta's), and it is this critical distinction that is often ignored in the portrayal of gangsta' rap by the press and visual media. As Ezy-E proclaims, " ... its not about black or white, but green," and therein lies the foundation of the gangsta' rap style. Ice T calls the rap game a hustle, and a " ... hustler can make anything outta anything." (189) For him the game is "ghetto finesse." "It's Not About A Salary," its about "gettin' paid":

¹Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York 1990), 268.

I have a lot of pride that I put finesse in my game .. You hit this level of, I wanna dine and eat with captains and admirals and be at the spot with the fine hos, and you know, all that ol' gangsta shit like standin' on the corner, drinkin' a forty, I'm tryin' to drink Dom nigga ... I understand the gang mentality totally, but there's an elevation that happens ... That's what I'm about. I ain't trying' to go back that route 'cause hustlers have learned to become invisible. You can see the gangbangers and the working' brothers and OG's who are still bangin' never learned to put no finesse in they game, and they found a home in the streets. Ain't nothing fly about that. Players want the finest shit, that's it ... (188)

This bit of inner-city philosophizing poignantly sums up how the power of the culture of the "life" has overturned the once vibrant working-class values of Black Los Angeles, with its emphasis on responsibility, civic virtue, and the sanctity of hard work. What has been substituted and duplicated is the culture of the "Mack," the hustler, the drug dealer—characters who inhabit the world of the lumpenproletariat and whose predatory behaviour has scarred many inner cities forever. The gangsta' "flavor" is defined by this "myth of action," (the phrase is from hip-hop journalist Dream Hampton) rather than the real thing.

Gangsta' rap was mainstreamed in 1990 with the appearance of NWA's smash album, *Straight Outta Compton*, with its huge hit single, "Fuck the Police." As Cross notes, following the album's going double platinum, Compton "... would be as well known a city in hip-hop as either Queens or the Bronx." (37) This was followed by a slew of rappers like Compton's Most Wanted and Above the Law. Following the break-up of NWA, each of its mc's (the rappers) spawned posses, Dr Dre with Snoop Dogg, Ice Cube with the Lench Mob, and the solo careers of Ezy-E and MC Ren. Gangsta' rap went "real" in 1993 when 2-Pac Shakur (formerly of the comedic Oakland group, Digital Underground) was arrested for allegedly assaulting two off-duty Atlanta police officers, for "whippin' the asses" of the Hughes Brothers (Hollywood's newest black *wunderkind* and directors of the highly successful gangsta' film *Menace to Society*), and for sodomizing a woman following a concert in New York in early 1994. Gangsta' rap also took an unheard of twist in 1992, after the Los Angeles rebellion, when members of the Bloods and Crips turned their "skillz" to rapping, not "gangbanging."

What is the fascination in American society with gangsta' rap and the corporate quest to exhaust the genre's potentialities, since most hip-hop is consumed by young white men from the suburbs and small towns of America? Ezy-E gives the answer:

They like listening to that 'I don't give a fuck attitude,' the Guns N' Roses attitude. They buy something like 70 per cent of our stuff. They wanna really learn what's going on in different parts of the neighborhood, they wanna be down, just like I wanna be down too. (201)

In post-industrial, post-Cold War, post-modern America, the quest for authenticity and "being real" has overshadowed the lust and greed of the Reagan 1980s. Gangsta' rap, despite its staging, its hustling, its pure entertainment value, speaks to this generation of white youth on the threshold of a new millennium, and the uncertain future demands an antidote to the dystopic past.

Cross has also done a superb job in uncovering the "multicultural" character of Los Angeles hip hop and the special role that the Chicano community has had in shaping west Coast hip-hop culture. In a supplemental essay to Cross' introduction, Raegan Kelly convincingly points out "... the concepts of *carnelismo*, *calo* terminology (homeboy, OG, etc.), the pachuco/cholo/gangsta style of dress; and the lowered ride, proper respect is due the *varrio*." (65) LA hip-hop culture has borrowed extensively from the pachuco aesthetic and style in creating its distinct form. The flannel, plaid shirt, buttoned only at the top, the bandanna, and, of course, the 1950s and 1960s models of American-made Fords and Chevies are a staple of the LA hip-hop arsenal. But it is not only these elements that have fertilized west coast hip-hop. *Calo* lingo, the language of the barrio, is as conducive to the lyrical form of hip hop as is the jive scat singing and shouting popularized by Cab Calloway in the 1930s and 1940s and refined by Ella Fitzgerald. *Calo* is the Chicano equivalent of the "Spanglish" used by third-generation Puerto Ricans in New York and is a vernacular that is simultaneously poetic and rhythmic. Kid Frost, the *jefe* (chief) of Chicano rappers, elevated the idiom to mainstream status in his hit single, "La Raza," from his 1990 album, *Hispanic Causin' Panic*. Kid Frost made some key observations in his interview. The first was that the elaborate sound systems, now a feature of low-rider cars on the west coast and the jeeps that cruise the east coast were a west-coast Chicano innovation:

The heavy heavy brass sound believe it or not started out in the Bay Area. It started out in Concord with the Concord stereo: they're the one that really started hyping it up. The lowriders, definitely the Chicanos are the ones that started the big boom system ... Those Mexicans are in lowriders, those Mexicans, and it turned into styles where everybody wanted to have a system more louder than the next guy so the amps came in, and once that happened the explosion of the big boom system happened. But there were no boom systems in New York at that time. (192)

The "Kid" provides a major corrective to this episode in hip-hop history. He also makes an eloquent defense of Chicano rap, by first dealing with the issue of Chicano pride, self-esteem and role models:

Knowing all that (the role model invisibility), we really had to be cool with how we came out. We had to be cool knowing our Spanish, cool with the lyrical content. It's a big myth, from what people hear of these NWA, Easy E, records they think right way that's the way south central is but in reality it's two races tryin' to live together. I mean, first of all Los Angeles is predominantly Hispanic, so for them not to have Latin rappers, or not to have

rappers kicking Spanish flavours, it doesn't make sense ... There is a new merge of Latin rap flooding the market. (192-3)

Carnelismo (brotherhood) is the essence of the message of Chicano rappers. Aztlan Underground sums it up in a magnificent lyric:

Imagine if you will all Raza gangs united
United together and ready to fight against the real.
The real enemy,
All those who don't want us to be free,
Free in Aztlan. (266)

The Samoan posse, the Boo Yaa Tribe, have called for pan-ethnic and interracial unity. MC Godfather remarks:

It isn't about a black or white thing, it's about a minority thing, we all have to get together, that's why we got together with Ice T so we could show ... on one song we got three black guys (Ice Cube, Ice T, King Tee), Samoan and a Hispanic (Kid Frost). That is why we got the song 'Brother to Brother,' stop killing each other. (151)

House of Pain are the first Irish American hip-hop group to make an impact with similar pronouncements. Their 1992 album, *Fine Malt Lyrics*, included the smash single, "Jump Around," the video for which was filmed on location at the 1991 New York City St. Patrick's Day Parade. It was a catchy party record filled with the imagery and symbols of Eire. MC Everlast comments on House of Pain's mixing of Irish culture and hip-hop music:

We haven't found the right way to do it justice you know, but as soon as we do, 'cause it's kind of a bugged out form of music you know? If you use it wrong, it'll sound just country, but if you use it right to make it sound Irish — (I) got a lot of Irish Rover records, a compilation of Irish boat music from Irish comin' over to America. Right now the Irish is just in the lyrics. I'm American Irish, it's cultural history, Irish in the roots. (251)

Even more extraordinary are the Jewish rappers, Blood of Abraham, whose 1993 self-titled album included the hit single, "Scaffold on the Chapel." The accompanying video was filmed on location in Jerusalem and includes images of the orthodox praying at the wailing wall, Ethiopian Jews, and surprising scenes of Jews and Arabs co-existing. They give their tribute to African American rappers in Cross' interview. MC Mazik discussed the meaning of their use of the rap form to express their own ethnicity:

I don't consider us a concept group, 'cause everything is from the heart. We always knew that we wanted to be proud of who we are. The whole way we wanted to go was not to be imitating but create something' new and let the influences we grew up with affect that ...

Other groups like House of Pain or Cypress Hill, groups that are ethnically aware, they're not imitating another culture. They're respecting it and they're being influenced by it. And that's how I think we are, we're takin' an African American art form and letting it influence us with the love we have for it and I think you can't front on shit like that. (255)

These eloquent testimonials by rappers from the other Los Angeles clearly demonstrate the universality of this African American art form, predicted to die when it first appeared in 1979. Now hip-hop culture, style, and of course, rapping have become the very essence, the defining ingredient, in American youth culture.

If there is a glaring omission in Cross' book, it is the fact that it contains only two interviews with female rappers, Nefertite and Urban Prop. This absence is inexcusable, since Los Angeles has a variety of female artists and styles — the gangsta' rap of Boss, the "booty rap" of HWA (Hoes With an Attitude), the message rap of Ice Cube's protege, YoYo, and many others. The overwhelmingly male tone of the book — the *machismo*, the blatantly sexist language (referring frequently to women as bitches and hos, as some of the quoted interviews have indicated), the gang-and-gun culture with its emphasis on "smokin'" (killing) one's opponents, and the glorifying of the pimp life-style, could have been forcefully balanced by including a range of interviews with female rappers. It would also have also shown that hip-hop culture has room for all styles, formats, and points of view. And it would have demonstrated the neutralizing effects on male bravado that female rappers provide.

And one wishes that Cross might have devoted some interview space to the young, Black filmmakers who have made hip-hop and Los Angeles such a force within the American cinema landscape. Premier among these is John Singleton, whose first film, *Boyz n' The Hood*, featured the acting debut of Ice Cube as the memorable gangsta' Doughboy while his sophomore-jinxed second effort, *Poetic Justice*, premiered Janet Jackson and 2-Pac Shakur as her love interest. The Hughes brothers' *Menace to Society* is an unforgettable portrait of black youth in south central, avoiding the sentimentalizing and middle-class moralizing so often characteristic of portrayals of ghetto life. These young filmmakers have painted a visual panorama of ghetto life framed through the lens of hip-hop. They are an essential part of Los Angeles' thriving hip-hop culture.

One of the valuable aspects of the book is the large number of photographs that accompany the text and interviews. The photo-documentary record should make all fans and scholars purchase the book, since much of this history is best recovered and explored through the photographic medium.

There are some noticeable errors that could have been corrected by a more thorough editing job. One frightful example, at the risk of sounding peculiarly American, is Cross' statement that, "Most black Angelinos have some family connection to the southern states of Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Kansas." (6) Oklahoma is a southwestern state, and Kansas a western one. Or the bold statement concerning DJ Kool Herc, "... a Jamaican who arrived in New York

in 1972 and originated a style of speaking over records he spun.” (15) Actually, DJ Kool Herc was merely bringing to New York the Jamaican dub style already a part of Jamaican culture, pioneered by deejays like Big Youth, who really originated the verbal art of rapping over pre-selected recordings. This style is the foundation of dancehall culture, where deejays took sound systems to the “yards” (any outdoor party facility in Kingston) to entertain in a truly revolutionary method of reclaiming public space.

These quibbles should not take away from the value of the book as the first documentary record of the West Coast hip-hop revolution. It compliments nicely the already exhaustive source material that has been done on hip-hop on the east coast.