

## To The Break Of Dawn (excerpt)

### 1.

#### Hear My Train a Comin'

Fruit may not fall far from the tree, but it does, nonetheless, fall. While blues obsesses over the theme of mobility, hip hop is local as a zip code. The blues references to crossroads, trains and railroad tracks rise from the itinerant life at the turn of the century. Between 1920 and 1942, at least 293 blues songs about trains or railroads were recorded. This is the music of black wanderers exercising the newly granted right of mobility in the first days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And thus we encounter titles like "Goin' Away Blues," "So Many Roads, So Many Trains," "Crossroads Blues" and "Further On Up The Road." The blues tell us that

When a woman gets the blues  
She hangs her head and cries  
When a man gets the blues  
Lord, he grabs a train and rides.

In hip hop, though, there are no references to highways or trains, railroads have been replaced by another central reference: the City. Or more specifically, the fractured territories known collectively as the Ghetto. Innumerable hip hop songs reference the term: Naughty By Nature's "Ghetto Bastard," Rakim Allah's "In The Ghetto" Nas' "Ghetto Prisoners," Talib Kweli's "Ghetto Afterlife" Lauryn Hill's "Every Ghetto, Every City, Dr. Dre's "The World is a Ghetto," all allude to a socio-economic blind alley, a terrain defined by the lack of mobility of its residents. Scarface – formerly of the ensemble *The Geto Boys* – underscores this point on the single "On My Block," where he rhymes "It's like the rest of the world don't exist/ we stay confined to same spot we been livin' in." The descendants of those early century itinerants now find themselves

trapped in urban stasis 100 years and one Great Migration later. Thus the relationship between blues and hip hop is the relationship between journeys and destinations.

The City is the unnamed protagonist of every hip hop song created. Up out of Hazlehurst and Bessemer, Sumpter, Natchez, Mulberry, and Sanford – two million deep – to lands where you couldn't hear crickets or raise no hogs. In *Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois fretted, thirty-four years past slavery, that the City would bring black ruination. A century later, Talib Kweli echoed the sage's observation on "Respiration"

Look in the sky for God  
What you see besides the smog  
Is broken dreams  
Flying away on the wings of the obscene  
Thoughts people put in the air  
Places where you could get murdered over a glare  
Where everything is fair

Hip Hop is blues filtered through a century of experience and 998 miles of asphalt. The City has its own crude dialectics: the mark is to the con as day is to night, the playa is to the lame as east is to west. The City is stone-hewn horizons and temples to vast acquisition. Industrial grit. Vice ecology. Iron arteries. Infinite anonymity and high velocity language. Remixed ritual: Malt liquor libation and dice divination. Check out Nas and the cover to his blistering debut *Illmatic*. The image of the rap artist as a young man is superimposed over the legendary Queensbridge Homes – as if he literally has the projects on his mind. The Bridge: the public housing development that cradled Nas and a starting lineup of emcees and producers like MC Shan and Marley Marl. To the emcee, shouting out the 'hood, the specific locale and its denizens is a prerequisite. The perspective of the wanderer has given way to the view of the stationary neighborhood rep, one for whom the hood is the universe and the universe is five blocks wide. DJ Quik broke this down in **1993** with his assessment that the whole world was "just like Compton." In the blood-feud filled arena of hip hop, where fratricide has become a cliché, a brother has to claim his soil – because who else is gonna preserve one's legend? It would be inconceivable that Mississippi John Hurt would shout down

at his Chicago blues counterpart on the basis of geography, but even in the current era of hip hop détente, east is east, west is west, and never shall the listener get that fact twisted.

On another level, the blues relationship to lyricism is distinct from that of hip hop -- and most of its pop music descendants. Classic blues were most often collectively authored and speak with the authority of a Negro quorum; hip hop, on the other hand, is obsessed with proprietary concerns. And thus, the biter's place of infamy has remained virtually unchanged since hip hop's inception. The biter – a mimic, a knock-off, a counterfeiter of rhyme styles – dwells in the sub-basement of hip hop regard equaled only by the “rapper” who ain't write his own rhymes. This concern with rhyme larceny and boulevard copyright comes to be a reflection of the social, economic and cultural changes in black America since the inception of the blues.

*The title MC means Master of Ceremony; some people who MC don't know what this term means.*

*-- A Tribe Called Quest, Midnight Marauders*

Among the zero-sum hustlers of hip hop, inc. the credo of “keeping it real” reigns supreme and gives birth to the ever-present contempt for the rapper ain't live it the way he spoke it. “Real” is to the rap industry as “All-Natural” is to fast food supplier, as “New and Improved” is to the ad agency. As “I Solemnly Swear” is to the politician. Witness Jay-Z's surgical dissection of cross-borough nemesis Nas on “The Takeover”:

Nigga, you ain't live it  
you witnessed it from your folks' pad  
scribbled in your notepad  
created your life

But hip hop's numb insistence upon “reality” misses the fact that the artist's task is to understand and interpret the *whole* world – even those realities that are not his

or her own. The demand that there be minimal space between word and deed is ultimately equivalent to demanding that De Niro remain in character as young Don Corleone into the infinite future. Talib Kweli was wise to this angle as well, but few in the mass of emcees were prepared to wrestle with what he put down on "Respiration"

It's a paradox we call reality  
So keeping it real will make you a casualty  
Of abnormal normality

But abnormal or not, the rapper is pressured to adapt (or adopt) his fictive persona in real life. The blues artist may sing about evil, but is not required to be it or live it. The rapper is judged by a different set of credentials – the ability to live up to his own verbal badness. To get down to the denominator, hip hop has come to understand itself in the most literal of terms. Faced with the asphalt bleakness of this world, stripped of the existentialist irony that we see in blues, the result is a perspective that despises weakness, the weak and everything associated with them.

Whatever else it might be, hip hop is not generally a music of sympathy for dispossessed. This is a genre that has come to be dominated by a brand of boulevard Darwinism. And on this last point, all distinctions of style, region and flavor start breaking down. Look close enough at the righteous rage prophets Public Enemy and the S-Curled gangsta villainy of NWA, circa *Straight Outta Compton* and what you get is two contrasting images of the same thing: The cult of the Indestructible Nigga. For all their moral indignation and pro-black advocacy, the closest P.E. came to crafting a song sympathetic to the lost and the least was "She Watch Channel Zero," – a moralistic screed that could've found favor with the Republican National Committee. And in the NWA universe, weakness or loss was a moral felony. This reality is what made songs like Tupac's "Brenda's Got A Baby," Nas' "Black Girl Lost," and De La Soul's "Millie Pulled A Pistol On Santa" truly exceptional. In each case, the artist stepped outside the conventions of hip hop to pen sympathetic narratives about the sexual exploitation of young women.

The hustler's way is to despise the very addicts he helps to create and in hip hop, the hustler's ethic has come to reign supreme. There is no parallel infamy in popular music for the so-called *bitch-nigga's* sad status in hip hop – a category that combines the two worst race and gender epithets into a toxic new whole. Punk-ass androgyny. That reality makes the handful of exceptions – like Tupac's "Brenda's Got a Baby" or Nas' "Black Girl Lost" stand out that much more.

I got more riches than you  
Got more bitches than you  
The only thing I don't got  
Is more stitches than you

-- Big L

To reckon with hip hop is to reckon, by necessity, with the fractured history of black manhood, and the tentatively constructed ideals of black masculinity in America. Out here, on the wasted and wind-blown plains of human conflict, the concept of being both black and a man is and ever was dealt with as a breathing contradiction in terms. And if, for a moment, the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment attempted to reconcile that adjective with its noun, the tax on black male suffrage was to be black male life itself. Roughly 3,500 lynchings took place between the passage of the amendment in 1872 and 1920; the victims overwhelmingly black men who had been targeted for the South's blood rituals. It was no coincidence that the lynched black body was literally disassembled and distributed to the gleeful white masses – with the penis reserved as the prize token. Recreational terrorism.

*Georgia, 1899.* Sam Hose shrieked at the sight of the knife and quietly urged his tormentors to kill him swiftly. This was plea none was inclined to heed... The torture of the victim last almost half an hour. It began when a man stepped forward and very matter-of-factly sliced off his ears. Then several men grabbed Hose's arms and held them forward so his fingers could be severed one by one and shown to the crowd. Finally a blade was passed between his thighs, Hose cried in agony, and a moment later his genitals were held aloft. Three men lifted a large can of kerosene and dumped its contents over Sam Hose's head, and the pyre was set ablaze.

Denial, as the saying goes, is a long river, but it is also the psychological irony that made daily life possible in the buckwild frontier of Racial America. And out of this tendency arises the long tradition of boast, hyperbole and signifying. Imagine this: a culture born in the context of two centuries of terrorism that habitually, ritually – desperately – rephrases reality, flips the script and declares the black men indestructible despite all evidence to the contrary. A coping mechanism raised to the level of aesthetic statement. The sages say that a boast is best taken at its opposite face value: the shouted claims of omnipotence, they tell us, serve to highlight one’s own fragility.

*And?*

It might have to be argued that no exploited class of humanity can survive while remaining focused on their own collective impotence.

I was born in the backwoods, for a pet a raised a bear  
I got two sets of jawbone teeth and an extra layer of hair  
When I was three, my crib was a barrel of knives  
A rattlesnake bit me and crawled off and died.  
-- Stagolee, ca. 1896

I tussled with an alligator, rassled with a whale  
handcuffed lighting and threw thunder in jail.  
I murdered a rock, and hospitalized a brick  
I'm so mean I make medicine sick

-- Muhammad Ali, 1963

Verbal assassin, my architect pleases  
When I was twelve, I went to hell for snuffin’ Jesus  
... I melt mics til the sound wave’s over  
Before stepping to me, you’d better step to Jehovah

-- Nas, 1994

These are lies. But our lies ultimately reveal as much as our truths. And without these lies, it would be impossible to have this specific truth:

*Jacksonville, Fla.* Jack Trice fought fifteen white men at 3 a.m. on the 12<sup>th</sup>, killing James Hughes and Edward Sanchez, fatally wounding Henry Daniels and dangerously wounding Albert Bruffum. The battle occurred at Trice’s humble home to prevent his 14 year-old son from being “regulated” – brutally beaten and perhaps killed by the whites. On the afternoon of May 11<sup>th</sup>, Trice’s son and

the son of Town Marshall Hughes of Palmetto fought, the white boy being badly beaten. Marshall Hughes was greatly enraged and he and 14 other white men went to Trice's house to regulate his little boy. The whites demanded that the boy be sent out. Trice refused and they began firing. Trice returned the fire, his first bullet killing Marshall Hughes. Edward Sanchez tried to burn the house, but was shot through the brain by Trice. Then the whites tried to batter in the door with a log, which resulted in Henry Daniels getting a bullet in the stomach that will kill him. The "regulators" then ran.

*Cleveland Gazette*, May 30, 1896.

The hope is to make one's claims to bad-motherfuckerdom a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The two most identifiable American folk heroes are the cowboy and the gangster, men who conquered the frontiers of sod and concrete, replaying the age-old conflict of man vs. nature and at the same time, man vs. human nature. In hip hop, so-called Gangsta Rap is an echo of folklore tradition of lionizing the outlaw, the robber of banks and stealer of men's lives -- a tradition which gets its start in black music with the blues. Within blues and hip hop, the outlaw has a different hue -- his crimes are the inevitable product of a system that has made slaves of human beings and left babies to inherit despair. The bluesman may ask "What did I do to get so black and blue?" but that same sentiment is being echoed by Tupac Shakur's line that "I was given this world/I didn't make it."

And this is, at its most elemental core, an American dialogue. The obsessive concern with violence that permeates hip hop -- and the understanding of it as fundamental aspect of masculinity -- descends only partly from the specific history of black people in the United States. Truth told, a textbook crime epic like Notorious B.I.G.'s "Niggas Bleed" has to be understood as being as much a product of the tradition of American pulp fiction and noir cinema as it is anything that coalesced in his native hood of Bed-Stuy. The fingerprint details of hip hop -- the gun as icon, the jaundiced-eye perspective on the world, the centrality of the City as a backdrop, the concept of the woman as inherently treacherous and the all-consuming pursuit of the dollar -- descend

from the fictional worlds of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, the cinematic environs of Don Corleone and *Goodfellas*. It is no coincidence that Tony Montana, Al Pacino's cocaine-addled Horatio Alger in the cult gangster flick *Scarface* has become the patron saint of the hip hop narrator.

The critic Robert Warshow has written that the Gangster is an American catharsis figure, that in a society where official power requires a state-sponsored public optimism in order to preserve the perception of order, the gangster's monochromatic world, with its pessimistic symbols and the inevitably bloody demise of the protagonist is subversive – in a way that is most useful to those in power.

*I watch a gangster flick and cheer for the bad guy  
And turn if off before the end before the bad guy dies  
-- 50 Cent.*

In the case of hip hop, the gangster has become the means by which the lives of the marginal, the lesser, the weak have been transformed into entertainment. An acknowledgement of American despair that is most useful to those in power.

But there is more to this story than vicarious slumming.

Self-praise, as the maxim tells us, is a half-compliment. But on another level, it was insurrectionary for black boys to hail themselves in song and story and right down to names they adopted: *Grand Master Flash*, *Grand Wizard Theodore*, the *Grand Incredible DJ Scott La Rock*. Literal self-aggrandizement. Walter Mosely once pointed out that within the black tradition, heroism is defined simply as survival against great odds – and on another level, the mere *attempt* to survive when one is always outnumbered, always outgunned. The boxer can scarcely afford to admit to his opponent that his unseen shot hurt him all the way down to the chromosomes. Thus: the overblown self-praise that is the cornerstone of hip hop indicates the scar tissue of black male powerlessness – and at the same time as it testifies to the unrelenting will to survive in the midst of a deck loaded with wild jokers and stacked way against you. Call this Stagoleeism.

But hip hop has no room for the antiheroic, no sympathy for the weak, no blues-like tales of the man lamenting the fact that he sent his son out to face the regulators. The one who ain't have no choice as he saw it: surrounded on all sides, no way to protect your boy without sacrificing your pregnant woman and the two young daughters. Jack Trice and his boy escaped that night in 1896, but a new mob found his elderly mother and burned her house to the ground. The lines between hero and coward, thug and bitch-nigga become blurred when choosing among rival worst-case scenarios. The truth is that some men are larger than life, but life looms large over very many more. When you boil away the excess, the hero might just be the coward with a better plan B.

But gems of sympathetic rendering like Talib Kweli's "Get By" or Black Eyed Peas' "Where's the Love?" are hard to come by in hip hop. The unanswered question is whether or not hip hop as a genre, as an approach to life will persuasively deal with human weakness and the ways in which the "weak," the marginalized and exploited are able to flip the script and instill their lives with meaning. This is the message implicit not only within the musical expression of blues, but also to the blues-contemporary phenomenon of social realism -- The aesthetic philosophy underpinning the work of Diego Rivera, John Steinbeck and Richard Wright in the 1930s. With *Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck delivered a reckoning with the humanity of heretofore disposable white people. With his murals, Rivera fashioned a vision of the outsized humanity pulsing within the common Mexican laborer (in the same way that Steinbeck attempted with *The Pearl*.)

To cut to the quick, the world is waiting for the rapper who can do for the common man and woman verbally what Diego Rivera was able to do with a paintbrush and a blank wall.