

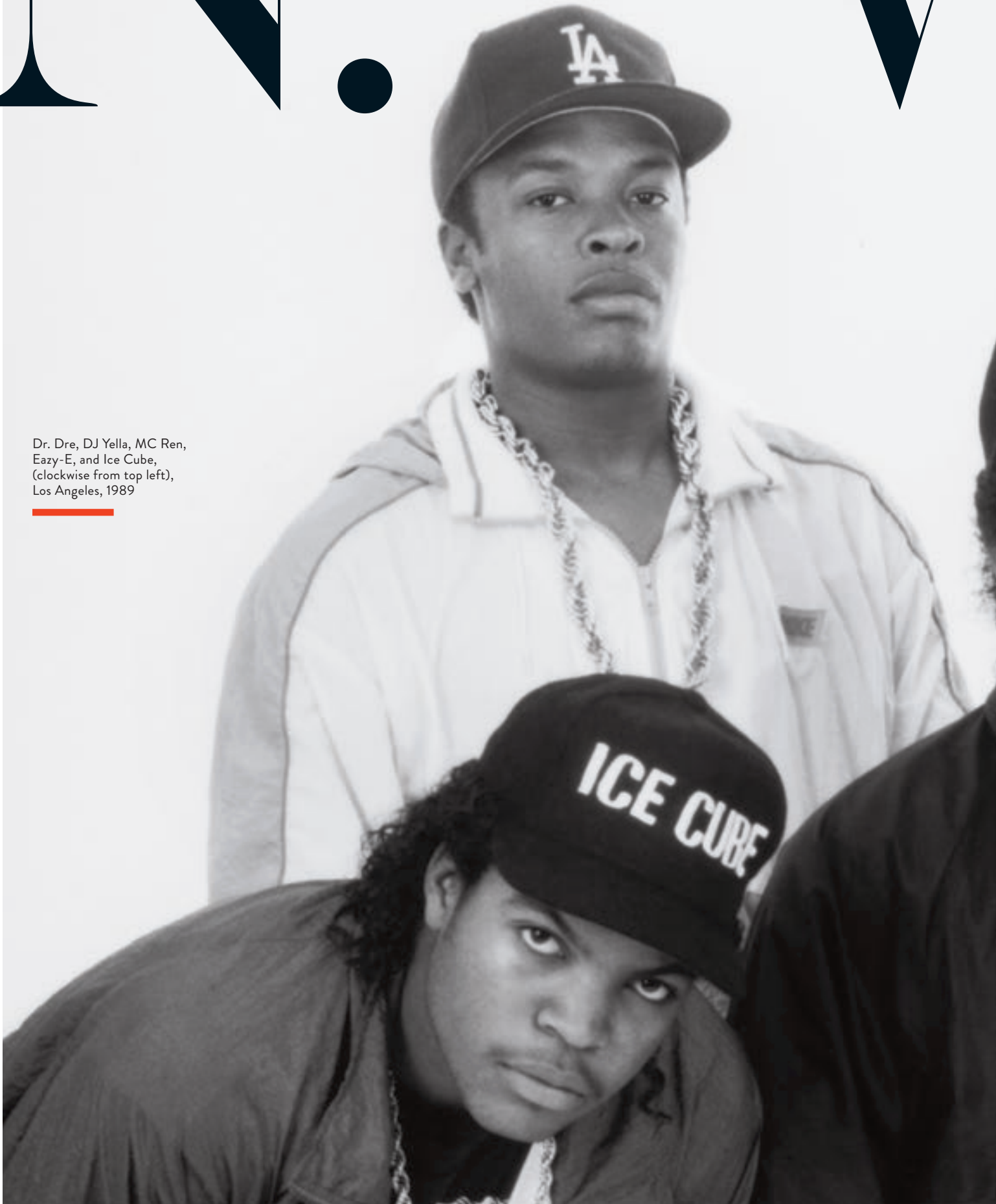
## PERFORMERS

They solidified the disparate elements of gangsta rap into a groundbreaking genre.

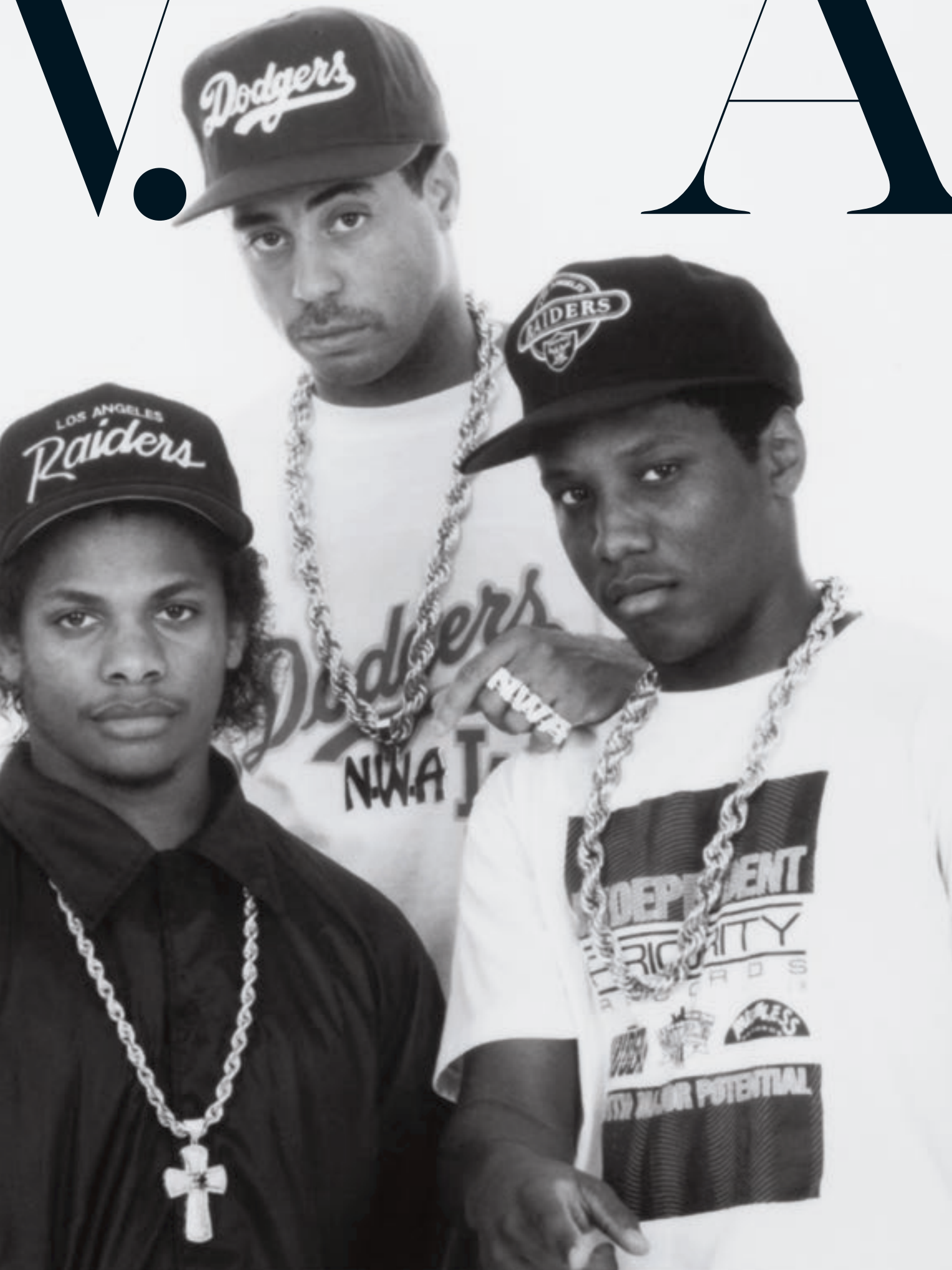
BY REGINALD C. DENNIS & ALAN LIGHT

Dr. Dre, DJ Yella, MC Ren, Eazy-E, and Ice Cube, (clockwise from top left), Los Angeles, 1989

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# V.A.







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nexpected. Shocking. Flawed. Revolutionary. Worthy. N.W.A.'s improbable rise from marginalized outsiders to the most controversial and complicated voices of their generation remains one of rock's most explosive, relevant, and challenging tales.

From their Compton, California, headquarters, Eazy-E (Eric Wright), Dr. Dre (Andre Young), Ice Cube (O'Shea Jackson), MC Ren (Lorenzo Patterson), and DJ Yella (Antoine Carraby) would – by force of will and through unrelenting tales of street life – sell tens of millions of records, influence multiple generations the world over, and extend artistic middle fingers to the societal barriers of geography, respectability, caste, authority, and whatever else happened to get in their way.

As enduringly evergreen as the Beatles and as shockingly marketable as the Sex Pistols, N.W.A (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) made a way out of no way, put their city on the



Opposite page,  
from left:  
Eazy-E; Dr. Dre.  
This page,  
clockwise from  
top left: Ice Cube;  
MC Ren; DJ Yella.

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map, and solidified the disparate elements of gangsta rap into a genre meaty enough to be quantified, imitated, and monetized for decades to come. But long before they were memorialized in the blockbuster biopic *Straight Outta Compton* or ranked by *Rolling Stone* among the “100 Greatest Artists of All Time,” they were just five young men with something to say.

“I wanted to make people go, ‘I can’t believe he is saying that shit,’” Dr. Dre once said. “I wanted to get all the way left. Everybody [was] trying to do this black power and shit, so I was like, let’s give them an alternative.”

Five men, with at least twice that many opposing points of view among them, N.W.A and its extended family tree of platinum satellites (an unmatched assemblage of talent including J.J. Fad, the D.O.C, Above the Law, Michel’le, Yo-Yo, Da Lench Mob, Del the Funky Homosapien, Hieroglyphics, Snoop Dogg, Warren G, Nate Dogg, Tha Dogg



**From top:** Rockin' the gold discs, 1989; then there were four, 1990.

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Pound, the Lady of Rage, Bone Thugs-n-Harmony, 2Pac, Westside Connection, Eminem, 50 Cent, the Game, Kendrick Lamar) helped set the stage for hip-hop's emergence as this planet's most dominant musical life form.

The group's initial run from 1986 to 1991 was relatively brief, but more than enough time to shock jaded hip-hopppers, captivate journalists, alarm politicians, excite law enforcement, and cause deep parental concern wherever their music was available. The debates they sparked – over misogyny, the cavalier use of the n-word, and the glorification of pathological behavior – still rage as hotly as ever, as do the careers of the group's surviving core members.

Eazy-E was the front man, the bad man, the sexual dynamo. Like George Clinton, he was the catalyst, the man with a plan. Short in size but charismatic onstage, his bulging pockets and gang affiliations infused his tales of unrepentant criminality and recklessness with hard-won authenticity and color.

Eazy was the one who put the parts together. He knew Dr. Dre and DJ Yella from a Compton nightclub, Eve After Dark, where he was an enthusiastic patron. They were part of an electro-R&B group called the World Famous Wreckin' Cru. Ice Cube was a member of a rap group called C.I.A. with Dre's cousin. MC Ren was an aspiring rapper who lived down the street from Eazy.

As important as any member of the group, though, was the neighborhood they shared. Once a leafy oasis of upwardly mobile African-American success, by the time of the group's 1986 inception, Compton had merged its traditional woes of segregation, failing schools, unemployment, mass incarceration, and gangs with militarized law enforcement, crack cocaine, and Reaganomics. "Compton is what Eazy wanted to put on the map, because nobody knew nothing about Compton," Ice Cube once said.

Eazy wanted to put some of the money he was making from his street activities into music, and the young hustler liked the uncensored rhymes he was hearing from local MCs in the clubs more than he liked what he heard on the radio. Dre told him about a group of New York rappers named H.B.O. that he wanted to work with, and Eazy agreed to put up the money for the session.

"I decided to sign this group from New York," said Dre. "But I had Ice Cube write this song for these guys, 'cause I didn't like the way they wrote songs." When H.B.O. couldn't relate to the Compton-infused lyrics, Dre suggested that Eazy take a shot behind the mic.

That first song, "Boyz-N-the-Hood," was Eazy's earliest attempt at rapping (and he was definitely not a natural), but it became an underground sensation. It also launched his multimillion-dollar Ruthless Records empire, setting the stage for all that would come later. His rapping style projected the reputation of a man not to be crossed, but his wry smile and impish sense of humor revealed a humanity





that attracted many fans.

As the song started to take off, Ice Cube returned home from Arizona, where he had been pursuing an architectural degree at Phoenix Institute of Technology. Cube was the loudmouth, the impatient youth, the brat. Still a teen when the group was formed, his boundless energy and incendiary lyrics challenged friend and foe alike.

Ren, in contrast, was the anchor; the non-showman in a group of show-offs. Stoic and sphinxlike, he was the most gifted in his rap delivery. He was unpretentious, grounded, and real – and without the baseline of his dark, menacing presence, the group might never have had the audacity to speak as forthrightly as it did.

Some of their early punches – on 1987's *N.W.A and the Posse* and Eazy's solo project, *Eazy-Duz-It* – landed, but it was on 1988's masterpiece, *Straight Outta Compton*,

certainly one of the two or three most influential hip-hop albums of all time, that the package came together.

While Cube's vivid imagination and cinematic attention to detail might have brought songs like "Gangsta Gangsta" or "Dopeman" to enduring life (and "Express Yourself" was the expletive-free Trojan Horse that got them on radio and video channels), it was his life as a marginalized man of color that inspired him to conceptualize and initiate one of the greatest protest songs of all time, "Fuck tha Police."

Even Dr. Dre was initially wary of cutting the track. "We always wanted to say that, but nobody was talking like that," Yella later said. "The song was true to the ghetto. Everybody hated the police. I guess we just had the balls to say it – and got lucky with it."

It's easy to forget that before the riots that followed the Rodney King beating verdict, the news didn't cover



tensions between African-Americans and the police. It was only these records that were spreading the word. And the authorities took notice: On August 1, 1989, the FBI sent a letter to Priority Records complaining that the song “encourages violence against and disrespect for the law enforcement officer,” and also faxed the lyrics to police departments across the country. In some cities, local police refused to provide security at N.W.A concerts.

But beyond its revolutionary message, the song stood apart for its sound. Dr. Dre, the innovator, the golden ear,

The mix was too volatile to last, but their impact would never be undone.



the genius, the icon, the brand, provided the sonic canvas, one of countless high points in modern music. In the annals of music production, he is a Mount Rushmore unto himself. (DJ Yella, meanwhile, was the behind the scenes workhorse, Dre's trusted right hand and second opinion: His quality control kept the studio atmosphere light and the stage show moving smoothly.)

Of course, you can't stay "The World's Most Dangerous Group" for long: The mix was too volatile to last. First to go was Ice Cube, who felt that manager Jerry Heller was singling out Eazy-E as N.W.A's point person, and short-changing the other members. Heading to New York, Cube hooked up with Public Enemy's production team, the Bomb Squad, and created the classic *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, igniting a bitter beef.

Now a foursome, N.W.A fired back strongly, first with the *100 Miles and Runnin'* EP and then with *Efil4zaggin* ("Niggaz 4 Life" backwards). Without their top gun wordsmith, the lyrics grew increasingly, sometimes indefensibly brutal and graphic. But Dre was heading into the stratosphere, creating a sound that was cinematic, visceral, dynamic; he literally changed the direction of rap music. The first three tracks of *Efil4zaggin* ("Prelude," "Real Niggaz Don't Die," and "Niggaz 4 Life"), when played as a unit, arguably comprise the greatest musical mission statement ever recorded.

Tensions continued to simmer, and in April 1991, renegade impresario Suge Knight came along, liberating Dre from his contract and persuading him to start a label together. At that point, N.W.A was over. Any lingering hope of a reunion was snuffed out tragically in March 1995, when Eazy-E died from complications related to AIDS. But the impact N.W.A made would never be undone.

"Before 'Fuck tha Police' came out," said Ice Cube, "the police could do no wrong. If they said you did it, goddamn it, you did it. Now the police are in question, their tactics,



**Above:** *Straight Outta Compton* is a box-office smash: Ice Cube, director F. Gary Gray, Dre, actors Corey Hawkins (as Dre), Jason Mitchell (Eazy-E), and O'Shea Jackson Jr. (Ice Cube) (clockwise from top left), 2015. **Opposite page:** Eazy-E, at Venice Beach, 1989.

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



**N.W.A AND THE POSSE**  
Macola 1987



**STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON**  
Ruthless/Priority 1988



**100 MILES AND RUNNIN' (EP)**  
Ruthless/Priority 1990



**EFIL4ZAGGIN**  
Ruthless/Priority, 1991

their motives. We know there are bad cops now, so every cop is looked at harder. The stuff wouldn't have happened without N.W.A doing *Straight Outta Compton* and letting the world know that you should be able to be your damn self and say what you want to say."

Dr. Dre is currently one of the most successful, imitated, and sought-after producers. His Death Row label (nearly as influential as Eazy-E's Ruthless) gave us *The Chronic*, his seminal three-times-platinum debut solo effort; the G-Funk orchestrations on that record created the signature sound of the gangsta genre. His Aftermath Entertainment enterprise is the current home of Eminem and the former home of 50 Cent.

In 2014, Apple purchased his ubiquitous Beats by Dre headphones brand for a reported three billion dollars, making him the wealthiest figure in hip-hop. August 2015 saw Dre's most recent album, *Compton*, debut at Number Two on *Billboard's* Top 200 chart.

In addition to being a successful solo artist (*AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, *Death Certificate*, *The Predator*) and entrepreneur for the past quarter-century, Ice Cube has also conquered Hollywood as an actor and as a producer of blockbusters – such as *Friday*, *Barbershop*, and *Ride Along*. His most recent project, 2015's *Straight Outta Compton* (a production collaboration between Cube, Dre, and the estate of Eazy-E), grossed over 200 million dollars, earning the distinction of being the most successful music biopic ever filmed.

The film's success connected the group to yet another generation, and served to reignite N.W.A's back catalogue, making them once again – twenty-four years after breaking up – one of music's main events. And as long as black lives collide with police brutality and American cities like Ferguson and Baltimore burn in anger, the music of N.W.A will remain as potent, timely, and dangerous as ever.