

Straight Outta Compton: an uncritical picture of the rise of American “gangster rap”

By Nick Barrickman
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Directed by F. Gary Gray; screenplay by Jonathan Herman and Andrea Berloff

Straight Outta Compton is a hip hop biopic focusing on the rise to prominence of the influential “gangster rap” hip hop group N.W.A. (“Niggaz With Attitudes”) in the late 1980s. Labeled at the time “the world’s most dangerous group,” N.W.A. gained fame for both their hostile attitude toward law enforcement as well as the explicit, harsh content of their lyrics.

The group’s 1989 major label debut, *Straight Outta Compton* (in reference to the group’s home town in southern Los Angeles County and from which the film derives its title) introduced into popular American culture the subgenre of “gangster rap,” as well as the careers of future celebrities Andre “Dr. Dre” Young, O’Shea “Ice Cube” Jackson, and Eric “Eazy-E” Wright.

Wright died in 1995 from AIDS at the age of 31 (an event depicted in the film). Both Young and Jackson remain prominent names in the entertainment industry, with Young having produced an album, *Compton*, to coincide with the film’s release.

Set in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the nearly two-and-a-half hour *Straight Outta Compton* offers a shallow, unexamined glance at the lives and careers of the various individuals who comprised N.W.A.

The film begins at a breathless pace. The audience sees a young Eazy-E (Jason Mitchell) in the middle of a drug deal gone bad. The scene takes a brutal turn when a Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) SWAT team, complete with a military-grade battering ram, breaks down the door. One gets a sense that death is always around the corner in this urban hell, as young people are just as likely to die at the hands of the authorities as they are at the hands of street gangs.

The viewer is then introduced to the other group members: Andre “Dr. Dre” Young (Corey Hawkins), immersed in his record collection and DJ-ing; rapper Lorenzo “MC Ren” Patterson (Aldis Hodge), an associate of Wright’s; the hot-tempered O’Shea “Ice Cube” Jackson (played by Jackson’s son, O’Shea Jackson Jr.) and Antoine “DJ Yella” Carraby (Neil Brown Jr.). All of them are more or less at the mercy of the social conditions, dominated by crime, injustice

and social misery. After several scrapes with the law, the protagonists decide that pursuing music is a safer way out of poverty (“Slangin’ drugs isn’t that different from slangin’ records,” says Dre to a skeptical Eazy-E early on).

From there the story unfolds quickly (and predictably): N.W.A. meets with meteoric success, marked by continuing conflicts with law enforcement, the political establishment and the media surrounding the release of the controversial “Fuck tha Police” (1988). The group is later torn apart by the social and personal pressures and conflicts that accompany celebrity in the entertainment industry, as well as their own unchecked ambitions and acquisitiveness.

The film delivers glancing blows to certain industry figures; the group’s duplicitous manager, Jerry Heller (played by veteran performer Paul Giamatti); Marion “Suge” Knight (R. Marcos Taylor), the thuggish and psychopathic CEO of Death Row Records and, to a lesser degree, Eazy-E himself, whose business operations the film’s writers depict as being manipulated by the greedy Heller.

However, the film shrinks away from drawing any wider conclusions about the music industry or the social types that inhabit it, or the period covered. Neither the group members nor the filmmakers have any perspective on the social and historical context in which N.W.A. emerged. But it is impossible to make sense of the group’s contradictory development without that perspective.

Much has been made of the so-called “revolutionary” character of N.W.A.’s music. By this term media personalities are referring to the uninhibited, obscenity-laden, vaguely anti-establishment nature of the group’s lyrics, which supposedly expressed the views and feelings of poor and oppressed inner city youth.

Emerging in the late 1980s, the group members were no doubt influenced by the conditions facing wide layers of the population. The counter-offensive against the working class begun by the Carter administration picked up full steam under Ronald Reagan. Major attacks on social spending, strike-breaking and militarism characterized the latter’s administration. In Southern California the auto industry shed thousands of jobs in the 1980s (the last auto plant in the region closed in 1992), along with the aerospace and defense

industries. The simmering popular anger would erupt in Los Angeles in a major riot in April 1992 after the acquittal of police officers in the savage beating of Rodney King.

At one point, the film shows Ice Cube asserting to a crowd of reporters that his music is simply “a reflection of [N.W.A.’s] reality.” Elsewhere, Cube tells a hostile interviewer that he is “a reporter just like you, the only difference is that I’m honest.”

The political-ideological climate at the time, however, was dominated by capitalist triumphalism eventually associated with the collapse of the Stalinist regimes, worship of the “free market” and the celebration of the most rancid forms of individualism. The official civil rights movement, once animated by the ideals of political and, to a certain degree, social equality, had degenerated by the mid-1980s into the promotion of identity politics, “black capitalism” and the elevation of a small layer of black businessmen and political figures into positions of power. African American, Democratic Party figures such as Thomas Bradley (Los Angeles’ mayor from 1973 to 1993) oversaw the deindustrialization of major cities throughout this period.

To what extent did genuine opposition to these conditions find its way into N.W.A.’s “revolutionary” music? Not to any great extent, frankly. The group’s music was largely distinguished by its celebration of crime, misogyny and violence. The various protests against police brutality—predominantly depicted in racial terms—by no means represented a conscious break with the source of repression: the capitalist status quo.

One must say that there is even a tragic, or tragi-comic element to this process. Whatever they may have been intending to do and despite all the noise and braggadocio, gangster rap artists ended up adopting a crude, quasi-lumpen version of the prevailing business ethos of the day (extending to the ridiculous and sometimes fatal feuding), unashamedly promoting the hustler’s mentality. They became a specific sub-group of “black entrepreneurs,” almost entirely indifferent to the poverty, unemployment and homelessness that were growing steadily worse in the inner cities.

Despite certain hard-hitting or more socially realistic moments, F. Gary Gray’s work takes a fundamentally uncritical approach to these issues. Indeed the filmmakers apparently subscribe to the same pro-business ideology. Screenwriter Jonathan Herman, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, sees the N.W.A. narrative as one of the stories “of ethnic or racial minorities struggling to make it by going outside the system and its conventions.” Herman suggests that the N.W.A. members were merely “seizing the opportunity” to be successful. He compares *Straight Outta Compton* to the remake of *Scarface* he is now working on: “It’s an American Dream story ... I guess I just like those stories. Because all these years later we’re still figuring out what ... it means to be American.”

In the film’s final moments, we see a montage dedicated to the various surviving musicians’ careers since the group’s disbanding in 1991. Included are clips from the Hollywood films that Ice Cube—now a multi-millionaire celebrity—has starred in (ironically or not, he has played a policeman in *21 Jump Street*, *22 Jump Street* and *Ride Along*). Rappers Marshall “Eminem” Mathers and Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson (each a wealthy performer in his own right) and others provide sound bites testifying to the artistic (and business) savvy of Dr. Dre. At one point, a voice informs us that in 2014 the technology firm Apple purchased rights to Dr. Dre’s “Beats by Dre” headphone series, making the former-N.W.A. producer “hip hop’s wealthiest man” with a net worth of over \$810 million!

Gray’s film has performed well, taking in more than \$111 million in ticket sales in its first ten days of release, while remaining number one at the box office. *Straight Outta Compton* has enjoyed the most successful opening for a musical biopic in history. No doubt the film owes something of its success to the desire of many, especially young people, to see films that cut through the official version of things and approach reality in a more truthful, uncompromising manner.

The persistence and aggravation of the social conditions touched on in the film was underscored by the response of police during *Straight Outta Compton*’s opening weekend. Theatres throughout the country boosted security levels in anticipation of crowds of working class youth. There is no doubt concern within the political establishment that films treating such subjects as police violence, even in passing, run the risk of triggering social unrest.

However, those wishing to understand the significance of groups such as N.W.A. will have to look elsewhere. Rather than seeking to uncover the social roots of the gangster rap phenomenon, *Straight Outta Compton* largely indulges in a glorification of the rappers’ backwardness and wealth, while promoting the myth of the “American Dream,” in which an individual persevering against all odds “makes it.” Such a perspective is as far from social reality for the overwhelming majority of the population as it possibly can be.

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