

Detroit's Rap World Shaken

Written by Westside ID151

Tuesday, 05 October 2004 13:23 -

On a sun-drenched mid-September morning, hundreds of friends and relatives of the slain, would-be rap mogul known as Wipeout fill the pews of the Community Christian Fellowship Church on Detroit's East Side. Many of the mourners are dressed casually, in jeans, jerseys and white T-shirts, some of which bear Wipeout's image. Others here are in suits.

Tension ripples through the house of worship. A shoot-out is feared.

Two Detroit police officers are in the church vestibule, one in a department-issue jumpsuit, one in cop shorts; their sidearms seem wildly incongruous here. Outside, there are at least four marked police cars stationed at corners near the church. Among the civilian cars are a number of foreign luxury vehicles and custom-painted SUVs, which gleam in the bright sunshine. They sit on wheels that hug sets of polished chrome rims.

Inside, mourners cry, often screaming through their tears. They crowd Wipeout's gray metal casket, which is surrounded by floral arrangements that reflect his life: a floral Hummer, a floral record as well as more traditional funerary arrangements, including one with his photograph as an inset.

The saddened friends and associates often shout, "Oh, Boy!" That was the mantra of Please Believe It, the company 32-year-old Wipeout (whose real name was Antonio Caddell Jr.) was working to establish as a force in Detroit's hip-hop industry and to take to national success. There is a cloud of pain hovering over his death that feels dense enough to touch.

Then a young man walking down the aisle after viewing the body staggers, dips, seeming to nearly faint. Others move to catch him, and the man tearfully shouts, "Stop touching me!" He storms out of the sanctuary, sending waves of alarm through the pews.

One by one, young men rise and head for the front door. Dozens leave their seats. The Rev. Bishop Samuel Wilson beckons everyone to return to their seats out of courtesy to Wipeout's family. Nothing is going to happen. It's just a false alarm. There is a round of applause, and everyone settles down.

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Some leaf through Wipeout's funeral program, which is designed in the style of a gaudy hip-hop fanzine.

The Please Believe It logo is included on the cover. So are previews of albums due to be released on the label. Two pages of ads promote past and upcoming rap albums.

A list of Wipeout's past and present nicknames are typeset to look like subtitles of must-read articles:

Lil' Tone.

Fat Tone.

Beat Box Tone.

Big Homie.

Big Baby.

Wipeout.

Wipeout was gunned down on the morning of Sept. 18, when, according to police, he was standing in front of the Candy Bar nightclub on Woodward and John R in downtown Detroit. A bystander, 36-year-old Anthony Roberson, of Detroit, recognized the record producer/exec and sometimes rapper and went to greet him.

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Two men approached and opened fire. Wipeout died instantly of multiple gunshot wounds. Roberson, apparently in the wrong place at the worst time, died hours later from wounds sustained.

And two days later, gunmen burst in on a rival of Wipeout's who goes by the name of Blade Icewood. Blade, too, was shot multiple times. Left for dead, he instead lingered in intensive care, leaving those familiar with Detroit's rap scene asking what had led to this — and apprehensive about what lay ahead.

No Crips

Detroit has never been the home to the kind of all-encompassing urban gangs that are associated with the roots of gangster rap in places like Los Angeles — with its infamous Crips and Bloods — in the 1980s. But Detroit has its loose neighborhood outfits.

Visit Platinum Records on West Seven Mile Road, and the owner, who refers to herself as "Mama Theresa," will point out promotional posters for local rappers on her walls. And she'll tell you who's associated with the Joy Road crowd, with Puritan Avenue, who hails from Schoolcraft and Seven Mile roads. Her small storefront shop is an outlet for local hip-hop talent. She says her church sisters criticize her for selling "that rap, but it's what the kids do." If it will keep them doing something constructive, she will support them. Besides, she says, most of them are not violent.

But beyond the neighborhood demarcations, no geographical marker divides Detroit's rap world more than the division between West Side and East Side.

West Side neighborhoods, according to Dr. Carl Taylor, a Detrouiter who teaches sociology at Michigan State University, are associated with middle-class lifestyles. They are somewhat more affluent than many East Side enclaves, which are considered poorer, more meager areas.

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Police say street thugs sometimes carry the same mentalities. East Side hustlers tend to be more conservative, while West Siders are more likely to be big spenders.

Taylor says the East and West Side rivalry goes back to the heyday of Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood in the 1950s and before.

"The East Side was always considered primitive," he says. "Brothers were known as rough, street-ready warriors. Niggas on East Side had lots of gangs. Even skin pigmentation was an issue, light-skinned niggas versus dark-skinned niggas. It goes all [the] way back to Hastings. When you talk Seven Mile, like by U of D High, you were there. That's where the money was. Say you had a girl who lived over there, you made it."

Police do not discount the role this decades-old tension between East and West may have played into the shootings that claimed Wipeout and Roberson, and left Blade clinging to life. It clearly played into fears that more bloodshed would follow.

Having grown up in the area on the East Side around Jefferson and Conner, Wipeout's biggest success came with a group called the Eastside Chedda Boyz.

According to one theory, it was a dispute over who that name belonged to that led to the shooting. Blade Icewood was from the West Side and associated with a hardcore rap group called the Street Lordz that also had a claim to the Chedda Boyz name.

Once "I'm a Chedda Boy," a song by the Eastside Chedda Boyz, became a staple on local radio last year, conflict over the name seemed to intensify.

The single rode an infectious refrain — "I'm a Chedda boy, baby. That's fa sho. Me and my homies come through with dough" — over a bouncy track, low on instrumentation and heavy on drums, to the delight of listening audiences. It was a standard hardcore ego-trip, braggadocio about money and material displays. The Eastside Chedda Boyz marketed the accompanying album, *Makin' Chedda on da Eastside*, aggressively, promoting it in strip clubs, which are considered key testing grounds for potential hit songs, and regional radio.

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Wipeout rapped sporadically on the album, but stayed mainly in the background while his 10-rapper stable — Anguish (Malik), P-Frown, Lil' Cheezy, Lil' Baby, Lil' Dre, Lil' Joe, Rell, Tuff Tone, Bucho, Mall — carried the lyrical brunt. (*Metro Times* wrote about the group, as part of its “Soul Purpose” series, on June 23, 2003).

They were riding high in the city, surrounded by all the right rumors. Tens of thousands of records were said to have been sold. Record companies such as Sony and Universal were said to have knocked on their door. The future looked bright.

The Chedda Boyz name, however, had a tangled past, and apparently began with the West Side Street Lordz.

A record business insider close to Wipeout's family, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Wipeout and Blade of the Street Lordz nonetheless had an understanding that the East Siders could use the name without fear of conflict. He described the two as having been friends.

In their music, both groups rapped about the same street-oriented topics — life in the hood, money and materialism, sex and violence.

The Street Lordz released their independent debut album, *The Rollies Don't Tick Tock*, around the same time as the Eastside Chedda Boyz released *Makin' Chedda*

. Though it apparently racked up decent sales — Soundscan reports neither group's sales figure accurately since many of their CDs were sold at non-reporting outlets — it failed to generate as much buzz in the street.

The insider says this frustrated the Street Lordz, who responded by claiming, in publicity for their sophomore release, to be the original Chedda Boyz.

Attempts to talk to members of the Street Lordz were unsuccessful.

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The Street Lordz then released a second album, *Platinum Masterpiece*. They subtitled it *Original Chedda Boyz*

, and paid a bevy of A-list rap celebrities — including Juvenile, Beanie Sigel and Brian “Baby” Williams, also known as Birdman — to make cameo appearances.

Bogged down by the weight of its celebrity guests, *Masterpiece* proved musically inconsistent and fared no better than *Rollies*

Blade didn't slow down, though. He publicized his frustration with the Chedda Boyz on his solo album, *Stackmaster*, which was released earlier this year. The CD comes with a bonus DVD that features a homemade music video, some outtakes, and an interview, which Blade gives while receiving a haircut in a nondescript garage. He is shown sitting down, apron draped around his neck, with a car parked behind him. He speaks with a slow and deliberate Midwest drawl, occasionally smirking. This is where he gives his account of the history of the Chedda Boyz name.

“Chedda Boyz, that name originated from the Seven Mile-Evergreen hood,” he says. “We was young niggas gettin’ cheddar, so fuck it, we the Chedda Boyz. I wasn’t thinkin’ about no goddamn rap. I could just rap. I just took the [name] Chedda Boyz, flipped it and turned it into the Street Lordz.”

He then puts a proverbial foot down on his side of the story.

“The Street Lordz Chedda Boy original, that’s me. All that bullshit everybody talkin’ ’bout, [claiming] it come from here, there, that’s where it come from. And whoever don’t like it, fuck it, come holla at me.

“It was all love, until they thought they was a little bit bigger than us.”

Another theory

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With that conflict in the open, the Candy Bar murders were widely assumed to be an outgrowth of the Street Lordz-Eastside Chedda Boyz dispute. Local newspapers quickly speculated that the shooting was connected to the musical conflict.

But the insider who spoke to *Metro Times* said Wipeout and Blade had discussed the matter, and agreed that both of their groups would keep their beef on their CDs.

He also suggested another theory, which police are known to be taking seriously.

“Everyone is working with the wrong information, he says, “the authorities, the people in the streets,” even loosely affiliated rappers concerned about their own safety. (In fact, one local rapper named Strike told *Metro Times* many of the area’s emcees, out of fear for their own safety, are staying away from the city’s nightclubs until things simmer down.)

The insider insists that Wipeout lost his life because he was wrongly implicated in a robbery that took place at the Candy Bar three weeks prior to his death.

Two men who knew Wipeout allegedly took an expensive platinum necklace from another partygoer at the club. The victim, who also knew Wipeout, asked for his help in getting it back.

“Wipeout told me,” the insider says, “I told ’em to give it back. They won’t give it back. What I’m supposed to do? They grown-ass men!”

Apparently, relaying this to the robbery victim did not go over well.

Rumors linking Wipeout to the thieves began circulating through the hood, according to the insider.

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On the night of the shooting, there were no indications that anything was awry.

Radio One station WDTJ-FM (105.9) was hosting a regular Friday hip-hop and R&B night at the Candy Bar. It's an event that is consistently well-attended and often spiced by the appearance of luminaries such as Russell Simmons and other visiting entertainers.

Rapper Freeway, who also appears on the Street Lordz' *Platinum Masterpiece*, performed earlier in the evening, heightening later suspicions that the Street Lordz could have been present.

The gunmen approached Wipeout as he left the club.

If this theory is true, it means Blade's shooting was unrelated, or worse, a case of misguided retribution.

Rap and violence

Rap, unfortunately, is no stranger to violence. It's a frequent topic in the music's lyrics. A number of performers have boasted of violent lives before finding success through their art. And violence has found or followed a number of the culture's biggest stars.

In 1996 and 1997, hip hop lost its two biggest national stars when Tupac Shakur and Christopher "Notorious B.I.G." Wallace were gunned down. Others have fallen victim to violence before they had the chance to gain celebrity.

For instance, James "Soulja Slim" Tapp, a rapper affiliated with New Orleans artists like Juvenile and B.G., was gunned down in front of his mother's home in 2003. Lamont "Big L" Coleman was also murdered on the steps of his home in Harlem in 1999.

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All four artists grew up in environments where crime and violence were a part of their reality. All four used rap music to escape their violent backgrounds, only to have it overtake their new lives.

Local hip-hop artists like Proof, Royce da 5'9" and Esham have all been involved in altercations, though there have been no serious injuries. In one instance, guns were drawn, but there was no shooting.

Strike, who co-starred in the movie *8 Mile*, and who knows both Wipeout and Blade, suggested to *Metro Times* that their lifestyles caught up to them.

"When you live that life, only a few people make it out," Strike says, "Wipeout and Blade are a product of their environment. It's just not worth it."

A Detroit police officer investigating Wipeout's murder also said he Wipeout and Blade are similar to other rappers who bring their day-to-day experiences into their music. Even if the music is not directly connected to violence, the officer says, the lifestyle still is.

Miles "Doc Chill" Dixon, a local artist close to Wipeout, heads the "Switch Play TV" sketch comedy and video show seen on cable access and formerly on UPN.

Dixon agrees that rappers who glorify the negative aspects of their world create an environment that embraces violence. He says he stopped buying into the idea that rappers who are young, poor and desperate to succeed can only rap negatively by talking about what they see on the street every day.

"You mean you can't look at your mama and see greatness?" he says. "You can't rap about wanting to send your little sister to college?"

An expert on urban family development, Taylor argues that, on the other hand, hip hop is

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unfairly criticized. He says it's wrong to view rap and violence in a vacuum without considering other social influences.

"Hip hop is not a root cause of violence," he says. "It's a complex urban picture that reflects urban America. Let's look at unemployment, massive uneducation. The street has changed, it's become harder and uglier."

A look at the frustration that grips many Detroit communities — despair brought on in part by high unemployment, poor education and a weak economy — may help outsiders understand how a man can lose his life over a marketable name, or an expensive chain.

Strike and Mama Theresa both go so far as to say the frustration and tension they see in Detroit neighborhoods these days reminds them of the 1980s, when the Young Boys Incorporated drug gang terrorized neighborhoods.

A Detroit officer who investigated cases involving YBI members disagrees with that assertion, saying that comparing the climate then to today is like comparing apples to oranges.

Still, the perceptions of people like Strike and Mama Theresa are telling. And the Detroit Police Department reported last month that, while overall crime in the city is down, gun violence has spiked. Some 808 shootings occurred in the first six months of this year, compared to 1,032 in 2003. That's almost 80 percent of last year's total in half the time.

What complicates hip hop, Strike says, is that it presents opportunities for young men from poor backgrounds to achieve success independently, free of support from major record labels. It's an alluring legal alternative to life in the streets.

"Hip hop ain't like rock and R&B. In rock and R&B, them cats is not thugs, they're not criminals. Hip hop is cats from the streets that got their money up," and tried to go legitimate, he says, adding that most rappers rap not to escape poverty, but out of love for the art form.

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But to those who fit the description, the street mentality is often hard to leave behind.

Yet outsiders often fail to appreciate the range of music that falls under the banner of rap.

One of the major trends of the last year has been provocative songs that are reflective — even religious — and that challenge the stereotypes of rap itself.

Yonkers, N.Y., rapper Jadakiss, a popular hardcore emcee, released “Why?” — one of the year’s most popular rap records. The song is a series of questions pondering a range of issues from the crack epidemic to his suspicion of the United States’ role in 9/11. Throughout the track, he drives question after challenging question: “Why they come up with the witness protection? Why they let terminator win the election? Come on, pay attention.”

Kanye West managed to snag a recent nomination for a Stellar Award, gospel music’s top prize, for his sleeper hit “Jesus Walks.” In the song, he raps about being spiritually conflicted and needing to rap about his relationship with God, even if it hurts his chances of radio exposure.

The Stellar nomination was later rescinded when it was discovered that other songs on his album *College Dropout* are more risqué, more profane.

The success of songs like these underscores the rise of hip hop’s underpromoted counterculture, commonly referred to as conscious rap.

Come home

Friends who take turns making remarks about Wipeout during the funeral say he was all about his business.

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One singer, a friend of Wipeout's who put his entertainment career on hold to go back to school, tells about asking for a \$100 loan to help him through. He was touched that Wipeout just gave him the money and said to forget about paying it back.

Bishop Wilson's eulogy of Wipeout eloquently suggests that he had begun seeking his own salvation not long before he died.

In getting engaged to his fiancée Sharonda Taylor, Wilson says, he'd also accepted the responsibility of raising her children from another relationship. Wilson asks the congregation to look at a photograph of Caddell on the 17th page of the obituary. It shows him standing between a Hummer and a Ford pickup truck, praying. Wilson says this photo, which contradicts the dozens of other that show him grimacing, game face always on, explains why agreeing to hold the funeral at his church was a no-brainer.

Wipeout, who kept a home in Atlanta, had also joined the city's Newbirth Missionary Baptist Church, a megachurch headed by popular Bishop Eddie Long, last year, Wilson says.

This suggests that he was trying to get his life together, Wilson says. He jokes, telling the congregation that he, like many of them, led a life once that involved crack cocaine. He says he likes to have nice things, and that kind of desire is OK. He, too, likes "ridin' on them thangs," referring to chrome rims like the ones adorning so many of the vehicles outside. He also likes jewelry.

But at some point, he says, the pursuit of those things began to ruin his life.

"At some point," he says, seeming to speak directly to the young men gathered in the sanctuary, "I had to come home. That's what I'm trying to say to you today. At some point, we need you to come home."

Source: [Metro Times](#)