

Gangsta rappers from the late great hip-hop icon Tupac to today's 50 Cent have been constantly criticized for romanticizing their violent lifestyles. Then there's rap artist C-Bo. The West Coast Crip-hop artist at least attempts to level with the impressionable young minds who worship him. Thus, his new greatest hits CD not only thrills listeners with thugged-out tales of extreme street life, but also includes the following disclaimer: Warning! Do not attempt any of the gangsta shit recorded on this album. It was recorded by real gangbangers, killers, and drug dealers who really lived this shit. Any attempt to copy this lifestyle may result in serious injury, jail time, or death.

No one knows this better than C-Bo, aka Shawn Thomas, aka Avenal State Prison inmate #TV44269.

With the advent of nationwide "three-strikes" laws and so-called "gang prevention" acts, the Hip-Hop Generation has become the Incarcerated Generation. For many of its victims, that incarceration virtually starts from birth. Just ask C-Bo, who grew up in a single-parent home in a rough hood in California's capital. "Just growing up in that environment, that's what I was seeing every day," he explains from a prison phone, speaking in a voice just above a whisper. "Gangs, dope dealers, the fancy cars. Everything that was out there made a motherfucker want to be like them, I guess." By his teenage years, he was like them: "Hanging with gangs, stealing, selling weed, gangbanging, fighting, the whole li'l thing, man."

Ever since he first entered the criminal justice system at age fourteen, Thomas has never really known freedom. Having done time in numerous correctional facilities throughout California (including Soledad, Tracy, and Folsom), he estimates he has been arrested around forty or fifty times, mainly for assault, drugs, and weapons charges. In his most recent arrest, he was reportedly doing 85 in a 35 mph zone, driving through the San Fernando Valley in a Mercedes with flashy twenty-inch spinning rims. Not only was there an outstanding warrant out on him, he was wearing a bulletproof vest and harboring a loaded handgun with extra ammunition, along with a bag of marijuana. Had he been on parole at the time, he probably would've had the book thrown at him. As it was, he copped a plea and took a two-year sentence -- a pretty good deal, considering he was facing fifteen years.

Thomas may seem like a character straight outta Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, except he's living -- and repping -- that life for real. As C-Bo (short for "cowboy"), he is respected on the West Coast and in the South and Midwest as one of the realest, hardest, and most authentic pushers of gangsta rap, a certified specialist in verbal mean-mugging and gang-related

Rap Artist C-Bo aka Shawn Thomas

Written by Robert ID1175

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grammar:

Boy ya can't fu*k with this

Ya bust caps at my Regal and ya miss

Boy ya can't fu*k with this

Ya bust caps at my Regal now you're done-diddy-done-diddy-done

And nothing can save ya

Moving through your city

It's the Garden Block gator

And I got hemmed up by the feds cause of you snitches

Chewed up your whole block with the fullys hitting switches

Since I was new to the city

You thought busting caps was gonna scare a G off like a kitty?

Criminal activities and violent retaliations have been a hip-hop staple since the days of NWA and Schooly-D, but few have done it with C-Bo's viciousness or vivid intensity. His song titles may seem stock ("Murder That He Ritt," "I Like Gangsta Shit," "Killa Cali"), but it's not only what he says, it's how he says it, affecting an old-school cadence that builds in dramatic intensity with every line. He also has put in the time: C-Bo's rap career stretches back nearly as far as his rap sheet. Since his 1992 debut *Gas Chamber*, he has SoundScanned more than two million units of his solo albums and compilations (over sixteen in all), without radio play. In 1998, he even became something of a liberal cause célèbre when his song "Deadly Game," a street-level commentary on Prop. 184 (which established mandatory 25-to-life terms for third-strike felonies), was both defended by First Amendment activists and criticized by law enforcement officials and tough-on-crime politicians.

"It was really political," Thomas says of that time. "They was really angry about me speaking on the three-strikes law going on in California. I told the police, 'Before I get a third strike, I might as well shoot him in the face, know what I mean? I'm-a get life anyway, so ...' But that's the mentality of the people who are out here in the streets."

That mentality has often branded Thomas as a real-life menace to society. He can claim to be one of a handful of rappers (including Mac Dre and X-Raided) whose lyrics have been entered as evidence in criminal cases -- "Sounds like the white folks was listening," he says with a laugh. (One of those white folks was ex-Governor Pete Wilson, who personally campaigned for the revocation of C-Bo's parole after hearing "Deadly Game.") "I guess they seen me as a product of the environment," the rapper adds of his critics. "They felt that because of what I said in my lyrics, a lot of people around the world might try to follow."

The irony of nouveau gangstas making millions by mass-marketing themselves to mainstream pop audiences -- Dr. Dre protégé the Game, for instance, sold more than six hundred thousand copies of his debut *The Documentary* in a single week -- isn't lost on C-Bo, a man idolized by none other than Tupac Shakur as the very definition of "Thug Life." While C-Bo recorded with Tupac and appeared in the "California Love" video, he never crossed over to pop audiences like his famous homie. The Cowboy's longevity is owed to an intensely loyal core following of dedicated gangsta rap fans assembled back in the *Gas Chamber* days.

Although he is one of a select group of West Coast rappers who've clung to the early-'90s mobb music formula, Thomas realizes gangsta rap itself is different now. "They in the club -- they ain't all the way back on the block like how we was back then, talking about grinding and

doing our thing," he says. "They just watered it down. It's probably a handful speaking the real, but it's a lot of them that ain't really with it, they just on the outside looking in. They ain't really been a part of what they saying. But, uh, that's how it is."

C-Bo isn't trying to lead the masses into revolution. He just wants to earn a living the only (legal) way he knows how: making gangsta rap and promoting up-and-coming talent via his label, West Coast Mafia. Even if you don't respect his music or lifestyle, you gotta admire the rapper-mogul's tenacious survival instinct and ambition. Frequent incarcerations haven't stopped him from releasing solo albums or running an independent record label from behind bars.

Even with its CEO currently in jail, WCM is gearing up for a big 2005, with C-Bo's aforementioned greatest hits album (adorned with a rapper-behind-bars cover portrait) and a full-length from Los Angeles rapper Mr. Spade called Real Talk currently in stores. Furthermore, the Cowboy's next solo album is scheduled to be released around the time of his parole in June.

This time, Thomas hopes he can stay out of prison long enough to enjoy his celebrity. In the meantime, he has a business to run -- a difficult task, given his current whereabouts. "You can't always pick up the phone and reach out and touch the people you need to be talking to," he admits. "Or traveling around, meeting people. You gotta promote, know what I mean?" Luckily, he notes, "I got a staff that holds it down. We converse on the real things about the company, and I make decisions from here." Prison life is not without its pluses for Thomas, who notes he is looked up to by many in Avenal as a hero for both his street rep and his iconic status as a gangsta rapper. "All these cats from the West Coast, I got West Coast Mafia to represent me in here. It's like, I'm damn near on the streets, but I'm just kicking it with my dudes that's lost for a minute behind the walls."

C-Bo points out he was a gang member long before he became a rapper -- in fact, he learned how to rap while locked up as a juvenile. He prefers his artistic independence, but also realizes it's not entirely his decision: "Major labels, they'd be scared to take chances with somebody like me, I guess, that's really out there in the streets and shit."

At age 33, Shawn Thomas is nothing if not a realist. He's smart enough to know he won't have many more chances at mainstream breakthroughs, and has put a lot of effort into using his street cred to establish up-and-coming thug rappers like Mr. Spade, Lil' Cyco, and the Mob

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Figaz (AP-9, Jacka, and Husalah). His hope for the future? "Trying to hopefully find somebody that can really change the game, if I can't."

The one thing C-Bo does well -- hardcore rap -- isn't generally viewed as the most artistic musical form, yet just like the prison-industrial complex, the genre is here to stay. However, as his example makes plain, so is the Hip-Hop Generation's endless cycle of incarceration, one of the consequences of the deadly game continually being played out on California's streets and, ultimately, its prisons.