

# Professor Higginbotham, I Presume?:

UPON THE IMPORTANCE OF A CRITIC REMAINING A FOOL

WHO DOES HIS HOMEWORK

BY CHARLES AARON

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14 About a week after the Sept. 11 World Trade Center attack, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Secret Service called on a young man named Rafeeq Hassan. An employee at Johns Hopkins' Center for the Social Organization of Schools, he had recently downloaded a 1983 painting by New York graffiti flyboy Jean-Michel Basquiat onto his work computer. The painting depicted a plane airborne over New York City, and a co-worker, thinking Hassan was the artist (and possibly a terrorist), tipped off the FBI.

The questions came at Hassan in a flurry: How do you feel about the attacks? What groups are you a part of? What do your parents do? What religion are they? How many languages do you speak?

Even after the FBI officials were persuaded that they didn't have the right artist (or terrorist), they pressed on. Suddenly, Hassan found himself cast as the FBI's *de facto* art critic. What did the painting mean? they inquired. Why had Basquiat painted it? And, most absurdly, what did Basquiat think of the terrorist attacks? The artist was in no position to offer an opinion, having died in 1988. Hassan talked his way out of the situation,

but wrote later, "I'm sure everything I've done or said is now under watch."

Reading this from a critic's perspective, Hassan was in an eerily familiar position—on the defensive, trying to explain the unexplainable, destined to be misunderstood. Every day, every critic faces similar questions. What does this painting/play/album/book/dance really mean? Why did the artist create it? And by the way, who the hell are you? Where did you come from? Why should I trust you? Even if the critic finally contrives a convincing defense, he writes with the knowledge that somebody, somewhere, will keep his worst mistakes on file.

So why stick out your neck? Well, for me, it was because I didn't know any better. Literally. Rural, small-town, northern Georgia, where I grew up in the mid- to late-'70s, was no wellspring of cultural chit-chat. As Chris Rock puts it, there were a lot of folks who were "not knowin'." Art was the province of artisans and the kooky class. Reading anything but the Bible and school textbooks was suspicious activity. That ol' southern birthright—storytelling—was not our family's genetic strength. Music was also a non-starter, except for stiff white Baptist hymns and Glenn Miller or Herb Alpert 8-tracks. Country music was frowned upon as "hick music," even though we came from a long line of hicks. For years, a cache of heavy old minstrel 78s such as "Turkey in the Straw" sat in the living room, untouched and unremarked upon, in a hand-cranked Victrola. And "creative" writing was seen as wasteful, unless it was in the service of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

This was no scarring tragedy, mind you. But when writing is your only real talent (after Wiffle ball), and listening to records your main interest (after college basketball), nobody's doling out helpful hints. So you seek out unauthorized information wherever you can and start talking to yourself 24/7, in your head or on the page. You get used to asking stupid, embarrassing questions. You shake in deathly fear when you meet kids from richer or better-educated families, who roast you for mispronouncing the names of artists, isms, whatever. You wake up every morning determined to kick the shame, but you never do. You wonder why listening to the Eagles is "normal,"

but playing Earth, Wind & Fire is “rebellious.” You resent having to think in “black” and “white,” and you become extremely self-conscious about everything. You develop little theories explaining why you’re different. You feel like a fraud. You wonder why your theories bemuse your black friends and piss off your white ones. You wonder why following your heart means betraying your heritage. You learn how to think on the run. You become a fool who does his homework.

You learn how to be a *critic*.

CRITIC AS “KICK ME” SIGN

MY FORMATIVE EXPERIENCE as a critic was getting hit in the face with a pie outside the 40 Watt Club in Athens, Ga. Well, actually it was a pie pan full of whipped cream, Comet, molasses and barbecue sauce, and my eyes felt like they’d been seared by a lit match. Driving home, barely able to squint, glasses caked in stinging gunk, I felt some decisions had to be made. 1) How serious was I about this whole critic shtick? and 2) Should I slink back to the club for the headline act, the band I’d been waiting to see? After a quick shower, I got back in the car.

The guys who’d pied me were from a local band I’d mentioned in a recent college newspaper column (my crime: glibly suggesting that they were in a “dance-pop rut”). But the grievance went deeper than that. By this point in 1984, Athens bands such as the B-52’s, R.E.M., Pylon, Method Actors and Love Tractor had been getting used to national adoration. *People*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, MTV and “Entertainment Tonight” had all extolled Athens as the “Liverpool of the South.” As Rodger Brown mordantly explained in his 1991 book, “Party Out of Bounds,” Athens had become a place where “rock poets in Future Farmers of America jackets. . .and porcelain-powdered party babes dance ’til the break of dawn to jangly guitars.” Hype, even money, was to be had; musicians and tourists came in search of local myths.

And nobody needed a smart-ass J-school nobody pissing in their acid-

spiked punchbowl. These were ambitious, still-unknown musicians swingin’ from R.E.M.’s beloved boho scarf, angling for a career. Journalists were elbowing each other out of the way to kiss the Next Big Thing’s beat-up tennis shoes. I was just an ignorant/arrogant young music writer who hated the Beatles and Led Zeppelin because they were always on the radio, and thought this constituted a world-view. A brat who’d bought a few imports and attended a few punk shows and thought he was doing everybody a favor with his acerbic exhortations. Something had to give; unfortunately, it was my face.

Returning to the club was the right move, since it won a momentary measure of respect. But the next week, a story ran in *Tasty World*, a local music magazine edited by musician David Pierce, a fixture of the scene. In an editorial alongside a photo of my face covered in “pie,” glasses cockeyed, Pierce wrote: “Aaron has such a base dislike for local music. . . outdone only by his inherent ignorance of music and lack of credibility in his writing.” Under the photo, a caption read simply: “Just Desserts.”

Despite the humiliation (a critic’s greatest teacher, I’ve learned), the incident wasn’t totally discouraging. It proved that someone was reading. And if an artist concocts an elaborate stunt to teach you a lesson, obviously he thinks you’re worth the trouble. But what I learned—that critics have to accept the consequences of their opinions; and that if you’re honest, people will inevitably hate your guts—did nothing to make my job any easier. At this point, I was just glad to get the feedback, in whatever form. The members of the band, which called itself Fashionbattery, thought I should have been more supportive of the young artists and bands in the scene. And maybe I should’ve; maybe I should’ve done a lot of things. But the more vital lesson I learned was that a critic couldn’t walk away. He or she had to show up and face the insulted, the unbelievers, the haters, the people who knew more about your subject than you did and could make you look ridiculous. And if it took a pie in the face to teach me that, well, props to the pricks in Fashionbattery.

THE FIRST TIME I queried the *Village Voice* music section, which at the time (1985) featured some of the smartest and most writerly arts criticism in the country, the editor politely dismissed my clips, adding, “Ya know, we really don’t need another white male writer right now.” In essence: Mr. Aaron, meet Ms. Identity Politics, and don’t let the door hit you on your narrow, irrelevant ass on the way out.

I’d never imagined that such a thing could happen to a redneck striver like me. I knew of affirmative action, had heard about the Alan Bakke case at University of California/Davis, but I never saw any relevance between those things and my life. I was one of those well-meaning, hard-working, lower-middle-class white dudes, not some snobby Izod creep who acted like God’s gift to the American way of life. I held my own in hoops and whist, dug P-Funk and the Commodores and could quote Richard Pryor routines. I had attended African Methodist Episcopal church services and spent time in black families’ homes; hell, my first kiss was from a girl with Afro puffs named Fran. I knew enough to not break out intricate soul-shakes or throw around slang like a wanna-be. The handful of times I got called “nigger-lover” or “nigger-lips,” it was more jokey than threatening, or so I naively thought. Race was an annoyance, not a barrier, or so I naively believed.

But this was some shit right here! Not only was the editor (a white guy, by the way) saying that my writing was weak, but he was also implying that a white-guy point of view was not necessary. To borrow an old phrase from redneck sophist Hank Williams Jr., this was your basic, brick-to-the-noggin “attitude adjustment.” And what was I gonna say? Hey, my clips *are* good, and you *do* need another white guy? And by the way, you’re a hypocrite?!

What it did was toughen my skin and push race permanently to the front of my thoughts. Maybe this was an immature overreaction, but I felt like I’d been handed a frightening new prism. Thinking about race in the South could mess up your head, but it mostly had been talked about in

terms of the past, and how we had to get beyond all that nasty slavery/Jim Crow/Civil Rights/fire hose/attack dog business. “The New South” was not just a business slogan, but a region-wide change in mood. Right. Supposedly tolerant whites in my hometown still whispered that “the blacks” already ran large urban areas like Atlanta, a fearfully reported myth that smacked of ugly denial to me even when I was a kid, though I lacked the lexicon to explain why.

In New York City, where I’d moved after dropping out of college, race and racism were constantly in your face. Racial incidents, many involving killings, blanketed the daily papers—the Central Park Jogger case, the Bernhard Goetz subway madness, Bensonhurst, Eleanor Bumpers, Larry Davis, Tawana Brawley, on and on. One night I was walking to the F train, on my way to a punk show in Manhattan, and a hoodie-wearing group of teenage boys rolled up and started taunting, “Yo, Howard Beach! Yo, Howard Beach!” like the predominantly white Queens neighborhood was my name. A black man had recently been struck and killed by a car in a high-profile, racially charged incident; another had been chased and beaten by a group of white youths from that area. Almost comically, I was listening to a Mr. Magic’s Rap Attack tape on my Walkman when the kids surrounded me. I felt like saying, “Hey, y’all heard this new Dismasters joint?” But I just walked on, shook to the core. The kids bounded away, laughing their asses off.

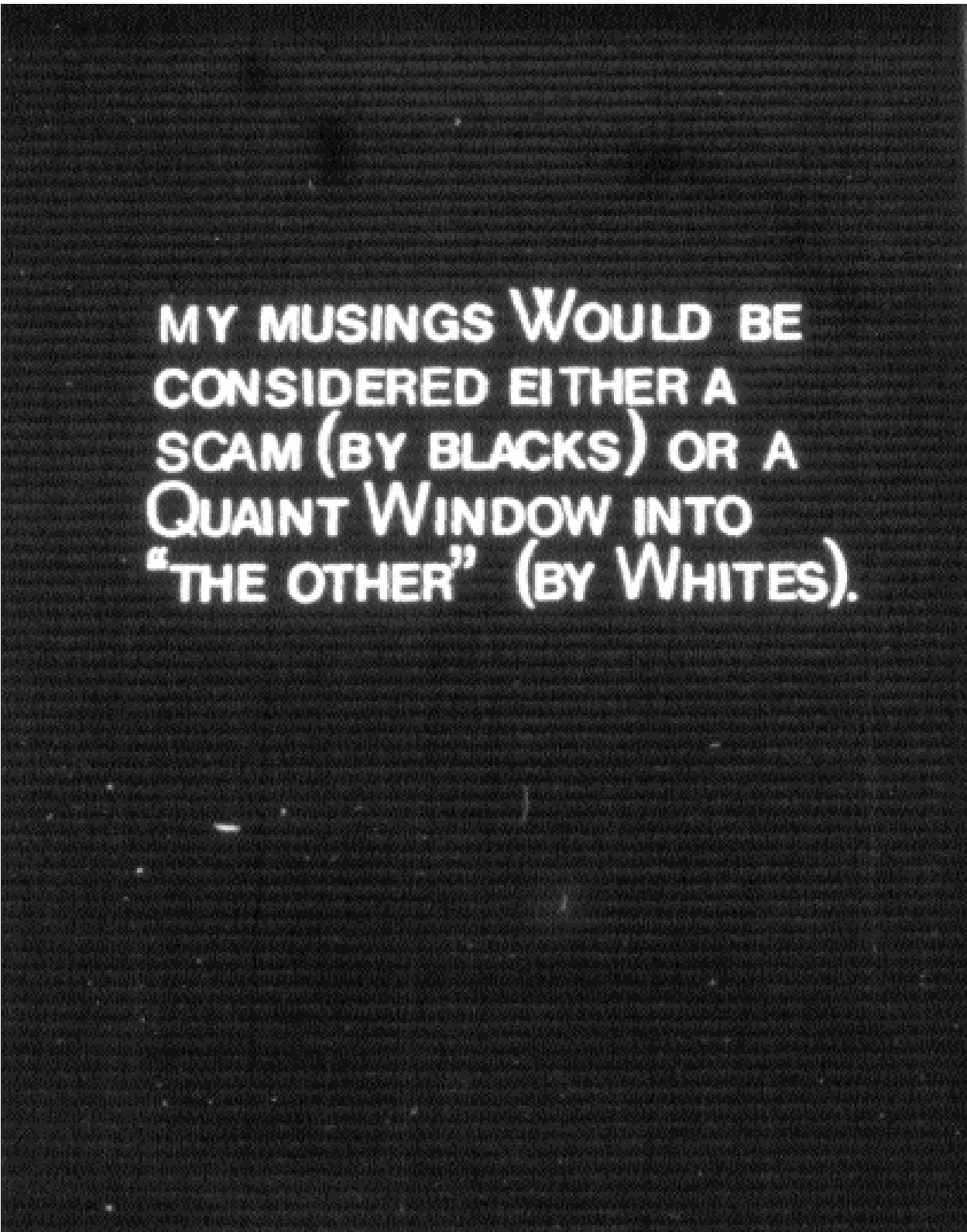
It was darkly hilarious, because in a sense, those kids were one of the reasons I moved to New York. I’d developed a long-distance love affair with hip-hop—the voice of New York’s left-behind black and Latino youth—or at least as much of an affair as you can have in Georgia in the early 1980s (buying 12-inches at Peaches Records & Tapes, checking out DJs at black frat parties, watching Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five open for the Bar-Kays at the Fox Theater, obsessing over “Beat Street”). The music felt so breathing-in-your-ear immediate, lo-fi punkish but rhythmically futuristic, with those booming, unforgettable voices. Enraged, witty, busting with pleasure amid a trashed landscape, they sounded the way I wanted to write.

But in the City, hip-hop had better things to do than babysit another tourist with a typewriter. After the endless parade of white hipsters and businessmen feeding off black music and fleecing black artists over the years, I was just another geek trying to get over. And when it came to writing or even just thinking about “black” (or African-American) culture, I realized judgments of me would be harsh, at least in New York’s media and arts worlds. My musings would be considered either a scam (by blacks) or a quaint window into “the other” (by whites). I came to think of myself as a callow British anthropologist in a pith helmet, sallying forth into the field in search of fresh species, rituals and languages. I would find key “informants,” who would give me an insider’s perspective, which I would adopt as my own. Years later, reflecting on those days of clueless, impassioned exploration, a friend of mine came up with a label for anyone who assumed this cultural explorer/translator role: “Professor Higginbotham.”

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This dynamic had its roots in the 1960s, when riots blazed after the passing of federal civil-rights legislation and a series of high-profile political assassinations. Concern grew in the newsrooms of daily newspapers about riotous “explosions of violence” in “the black community.” There was worry about where the violence might lead next; the unsubtle subtext: Are those crazy niggers gonna come over here and burn *us* down? The Professor Higginbothams of the day had already sallied forth, but blacks refused to talk to them, often physically threatening the professors if they didn’t take their pith helmets and step off. Newspapers were actually forced to hire blacks to find out what was going on “over there.” For the many journalists who were enlisted, it was a great opportunity, and productive careers were launched. The reporting quality soared—for a time. Then the urgency receded.

But at the *Village Voice* during the ’80s, a group of brilliant black writers—Nelson George, Barry Michael Cooper and Greg “Ironman” Tate—emerged to produce some of the best hip-hop criticism that’s ever seen print. They possessed the vivid personal histories, the cutting critical per-



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spective and the sheer writing skills to give the music and culture the hot debate it had always deserved. Though the music section was edited by whites, the voices of the individual writers pulsed off the page. The idea of a consistently rigorous African-American look at pop culture in a high-profile, white-owned national publication was itself remarkable. When pieces appeared by vaguely reverential or wiseacre outsiders (usually slumming from the rock beat), they seemed infantile.

There was clearly no need for my unformed voice, so I dummed up and studied up, reading the group's ideas and prose, awestruck. I got deeper into all things hip-hop, buying every Music Factory 12-inch I could afford, hopping the subway to every neighborhood spot of note, getting high and dancing at every party I could find. I didn't try to figure out whether I had a place "in the culture"; I just enjoyed the fact that Just-Ice was guzzling fistfuls of pina coladas and yakking at me by the bar at a Big Daddy Kane gig. The few pieces I did publish (a friend of mine convinced the *Voice* editor to cut me a break) were enthusiastically dense with detail. Not that bad for a shook-up white boy.

The *Voice* crew moved on to bigger things, and opportunities opened up for persistent unprovens like me. In fact, my best *Voice* assignment—reviewing Dr. Dre's "The Chronic," one of the crucial pop records of the '90s—came because Greg Tate blew two deadlines while working on another project. I poured my heart and head into the piece, cross-referencing sociology, literature, politics and '70s funk cosmology while chronicling the record's troubling misogyny and nihilism. In the interest of know-your-shit objectivity, I portrayed few of the album's deep musical pleasures, which can still fill a room of whites and blacks with screams 10 years later. But that wasn't my role, remember. I was Prof. Higginbotham, bringing the hard, deeply researched truths. The article's headline—"Shootout at the Ofay Corral"—referred to Dre's penchant for toying with black stereotypes in front of largely white audiences. But it more accurately referred to the plight of hip-hop writers who weren't black, like me.

IT'S A FAMILIAR scenario. After a few years of stalking the beat, you feel like you've put in legitimate work. Not only do you have a tight grip on hip-hop's origins (both the myths and the facts), you also know the broader history that shaped the culture. You're downright encyclopedic in your knowledge of studio production (i.e., which old records are being sampled, which machines are being tweaked), and you toss around your slang more discreetly ("That shit's gully, yo" followed by a quick wink). You start to ease back, acting more like you belong, and people start treating you with respect. You've been "in the game" for more than a minute, and folks notice that. You start thinking that maybe you should be on the other side—in A&R, or even with your own record label; or maybe as a DJ, promoter or artist manager. You're upset by the cut-throat way people do business, the way they exploit trendy bullshit, ignoring real hip-hop, shit that's true to the culture, music that so inspired back in the day, and so on.

In other words, you've become highly "edumacated," to quote UTFO and the Pharcyde among others, which means that you've reached a bolder level of self-interest. You make it known that you care, obviously, or else you'd be working on film scripts by now (though later, you'll work on a Eminem treatment, to be abandoned). Soon enough, you're accepted. You think it's because you know your shit, but of course, it's probably because whites like yourself can more easily broker access to money and power. Eventually, your bubble will pop. People start to question why you're always hanging around. Knowing your shit isn't enough: it's just a starting point. As *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* Arts Editor Ray Rinaldi cracked when I brought up this subject, "Very few critics know enough to *doubt* their shit!" He added, "Knowing your shit doesn't mean shit unless you doubt your shit."

A little white knowledge about black culture can be a dangerous thing—especially for African-Americans. Once mainstream publications realize that whites are capable of authoritatively writing about an "ethnic" subculture such

as hip-hop, the assignments start drifting toward those writers, who are judged as “more reliable” or “more professional” (i.e., they don’t challenge traditional editorial beliefs).

At *Spin*, a youth-culture magazine with a primarily white readership where I’ve worked for the past eight years, I’ve played a version of this role. Some of the first reviews I wrote for the magazine were of hip-hop records, and my second *Spin* feature (October 1993) was about the rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg (a.k.a. Calvin Broadus, a.k.a. Cordazar Varnado). I gladly did it, but in retrospect, I wonder if that assignment would have gone to a writer of color if I hadn’t been around. Not that this hypothetical non-white writer would have done a better or more authentic job, or bonded more closely with Snoop, but the question remains. How much does having a white observer add to, and *change*, the dialogue? Was I just taking up space that should’ve been filled by a different voice? Or was I better equipped than a non-white writer to shake up the preconceptions of a white *Spin* readership that thinks rock first, hip-hop second?

24 After my Snoop story ran, I bumped into Danyel Smith, an African-American and a former *Spin* columnist and *Vibe* editor. “I really didn’t think you’d be able to get what Snoop was about,” she told me, frowning. “But I think somehow you did.” Translation: “I didn’t think a relatively inexperienced New York whitey like you would be able to understand a young, gang-affiliated, West Coast black rapper.”

Maybe the story worked because I understood that I was in a privileged position—flying to L.A., staying in a nice hotel, interviewing an artist I cared about—and had vowed to earn my keep. I wanted to be overprepared for the interviews, to quietly observe, not try to fit in or floss, let people get used to a white stranger hanging out. I’d been told the studio was under heavy security, and gang trouble might roll up at anytime—Snoop was a “former” Long Beach Crip; his label boss Suge Knight had cultivated a Bloods affiliation as a star athlete in Compton.

Buzzed in through a tall, white iron gate, I saw Dr. Dre, rapper the DOC and others, eating Kentucky Fried Chicken at a patio table. Dre barked in my

direction, “Yo, Orville, what’s up?!” referring to my “resemblance” (we both wear glasses) to notoriously nerdy popcorn czar Orville Redenbacher, and everybody, me included, broke up laughing. There were many similar moments throughout the week: Snoop sidekick Daz blowing pot smoke in my face and forcing me to try some “chronic” before he’d answer any questions; Snoop himself wandering over while I was interviewing Dre, dropping his drawers to reveal a pair of white boxers decorated with tiny red hearts. Threats of gang violence and weapons aside (I saw a gun under the driver’s seat in Snoop’s gold Lexus), the environment was oddly reminiscent of my high school basketball years. Guys’ moods flipping from foul to gentle while a laissez-faire coach (here, Dre) applied selective discipline. There was also a connection along the lines of ’70s-era, Parliament/Ohio Players funk: We used to blast it in the school gym after practice, and Dr. Dre is famous for recreating that sound. It felt nostalgic in a way: a hermetic team with a hands-off authority figure, and no female presence whatsoever.

About a week after I turned in the story, a fact-checker called me over to her desk. She had phoned Snoop’s management company to verify a piece of information, and instead of replying by phone, the rapper had stuck a piece of paper in a fax machine and sent it over. The writing on the paper, angrily scrawled, read, “FUCK YOU.” The piece of info? That “Snoop” was shortened from the nickname “Snoopy” because, as his father told me, “He had a lot of hair on his head as a baby and looked like a little dog.” I thought the detail humanized a guy who’d been portrayed in the press as a gun-toting, bitch-slapping maniac. Apparently not. So much for the good-natured, nostalgic bonding.

I’ve since had many such encounters: half brotherly, half awkward and unnerving. Even Busta Rhymes, a genuinely pleasant sort despite certain apocalyptic obsessions, threatened to come after me if I published an anecdote he’d confided to me about a robbery. I left the anecdote itself out, as I am here, because my feelings about the situation were and remain unresolved. I tried to get used to the intimidation, figuring it was mostly pot-induced paranoia or

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bravado, and learned to watch my back. After awhile, I became fairly confident, and didn't check myself in the mirror so often. Interviewing more so-called conscious and underground artists, I even felt like I was fighting some sort of good fight. The underground scene was more multicultural (i.e., more white), and race was less of a stumbling block. People generally wanted fellowship and attention, regardless. Black kids who read my stuff later said they didn't know that I was white. It was the music-journalism equivalent of "Damn, you dance pretty good for a white boy."

I was in this frame of mind when I went to Los Angeles to interview the Watts Prophets, should-be-legendary poets, teachers, filmmakers and activists. The trio, considered by some to be the godfathers of West Coast hip-hop, was trying to put together a third album, almost 25 years after their influential 1971 debut, "Rappin' Black in a White World." The Prophets were radical elders of arts and politics in the U.S. who'd been through the ringer; after the Watts riots in 1965, a publicist for the group was discovered to be an FBI informant. They were men I deeply respected, and from whom I wanted to learn. Five years earlier, I couldn't have handled a conversation with such spry, prickly, hyper-cerebral fiftysomethings. Now, I knew I could.

Driving my rental car down Crenshaw Boulevard to the pastel-bright section of South Central where the Prophets lived, turning onto a street full of green, manicured lawns, I was happy, finally, to get past my near-paralyzing anxiety about intruding on, and maybe exploiting, a culture that existed primarily to give voice to non-whites. I'd found a calling of sorts—as a lefty informant at a mainstream youth mag, sneaking in stories about artists who spoke real truth to power, and not just as a writer about neglected kids on an ego trip, signing their lives away to buy a gold chain and an SUV. If not a ghetto pass, I'd certainly earned my place as a critic/journalist, regardless of skin color.

I parked in front of "Father" Amde Hamilton's modest house, where he and the other Prophets—Richard Dedeaux and Otis O'Solomon—had gathered. I walked up the stone steps to the foliage-covered entryway and rang the bell. A

few minutes later, Hamilton appeared in the shadows behind a screen door, black leather kufi atop a head of gray hair. Before speaking or moving to let me in or even acknowledging my presence, he turned to the living room and shouted:

"Yo, white man at the door!"

Turning back, extending his hand through the now-open entrance, he gazed straight at me, expressionless. Then, after a brief silence, we both began to laugh.