

## 1986

The Big Three kept our black shoes shiny. Kept us in dentist chairs reclined. Kept our grins beaming every Christmas morning, action-figure-armed. Lawn mowers, tools, Trans-Ams, T-Birds. All the while the neighborhood watched vigilant.

Some days my brother Malik and I would walk home from school, push open the door, push past magazines and lamps and clothes, everything strewn on the floor. Upstairs and down, a littered mess: a hairdryer, albums, shoes. Minus, of course, the jewelry and electronics.

What's behind door number one? The game had grown familiar. Some mornings as both our parents left for work, Malik and I would spot a young man hunched under a streetlamp. Wonder silent, "Would this be today's contestant?"

They knew us. Kept watch. Hatred escalating. Egg yolks and grape jelly smeared across our living room walls, evidence that our guests were not stealing out of hunger.

We ignored talk of epidemics. Because to be blessed in Detroit in 1986 meant you exercised a daily forgiveness. The house, the cars, the whole lifestyle collapses unless inflated with compassion. You tell yourself the incident was isolated. Hope the man by the streetlamp was merely lost. Hope that when you get home to find the door ajar, he has taken what he needs, pawned it into rock. Hope that you aren't provided the opportunity to talk Reaganomics with him.

In Coleman Young's Motown, you had to face the music, turn your back on the romance. Save yourself.

Meant you had to hear your family ache as you trade the devil you know for the one you don't.

## **ESHAM**

The tape was red. I know that much is certain. We were piled 6 or 7 deep in a Chevy Nova or something like it. Our goofy teenage knees knocking into one another. En route from nowhere to nowhere. Nowhere where we loitered, hoping to be noticed. Though we didn't need to try so hard, pretending like that curfew wasn't ours.

When someone first pulled the red tape from the industry standard stack of rap cassettes, we clowned it. Said it was wack, weak, booty, corny, foul, garbage. OG street hustlers were fine. Smooth Asiatic womanizers got a pass. But we drew the line at devil worship. That was for the heavy metal kids.

But we kept listening, because he said names of streets familiar.

In 1989, rappers came from places like Brooklyn, Queens, Money Earnin' Mount Vernon, South Central, and Compton. But Esham was a rapper from Detroit. His tape read: boomin' words from hell, with an illustration of the classic devil image: horns, forked tail, and a long stringy mustache.

We guffawed. Rewound. Sang along.

Ashy Baptist boys and one Jehovah's Witness, we knew better. But we allowed this 13-year-old, self proclaimed Servant of Satan to acid rap his way into our listless wanderings. Of course, we'd always have church the next morning. Church was 30 miles away in Detroit, just like Esham.

Esham's sound personified the crack era. He was not the manufactured elegance of Berry Gordy's Motown. He was a fetus

developed by the Young Boys Incorporated<sup>2</sup> and Coleman Young<sup>3</sup>. If you listened closely, you could hear the flames. Esham was Devil's Night.

In Detroit, there had always been mischief pre-Halloween: pumpkin flesh, splattered yolks, doorbells. Dare devils giving their angels the night off. But over time, the gas became fume. Pipelines spilled heroin, hollowing homes. Molotov cocktails replaced rolls of toilet paper. Devil's Night was scarier than Halloween.

In 1984, more than 800 fires branded the city dangerous. Smoke blanketed the sky black as affluent brown folk took white flight out of town. Headed straight to booming suburbs, moving trucks subsidized by the auto companies. We, too, made the exodus to medicated environs.

Together with other transplanted black boys, my brother and I piled in the Ford Festiva, anxious for escape. We blasted Esham, howled devilish laughter as we raced through the sleepy streets, the same streets that saved us from all we fetishized. The wicked voice, the pulse, the Pistons, the boomin' sounds of our birthplace.

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2 An African American Drug Cartel operating primarily out of Detroit in the late 1970's through the 1980's

3 The first African American mayor of Detroit. 1974-1993

## RESPONSE #1

On February 21st, 2010, the east wall of the Art Institute of Chicago's New Modern Wing was defaced with a fifty-foot graffiti piece painted by a team of writers in about 20 minutes.

On March 10th, a graffiti writer named SOLE was painting a mural on the wall of an abandoned factory. When police showed up and gave chase, he flung himself into the Chicago River and drowned.

*"We began shocking common sense, public opinion, education, institutions, museums, good taste, in short the whole prevailing order"*

—*The Dada Manifesto, 1918*

*"Dada philosophy is the sickest, most paralyzing and most destructive thing that has ever originated from the brain of man"*

—*American Art News, 1918*

So somebody went and done drew a mustache on the Mona Lisa. Which is to say, somebody took aerosol to staple, mocked how we consume our culture. I imagine them smiling when they did it. Because it's all just make believe, isn't it? Private space // public space. Unreal lines. Agreed upon modes of presentation.

The image has long since been blasted away. It's business as usual at The Art Institute of Chicago: Euro

centrism and expensive cheese shoved down throats that reflux the same tired conversations.

Law abiding artists, civilized, pontificate: What does it mean? Building upon the legend, filling up temporary space. Is it: Vandalism? Street Art? Graffiti? Whatever it is has proven gatekeepers ignorant by infiltrating the institutional art machine.

Terms like “hip-hop” woo corporate philanthropists, “urban” a call to arms for chic intelligentsia the world over. It’s widely emulated. Detroit, Michigan. Iowa City, Iowa. Those same bubble letters, jutting angles. Santa Fe, New Mexico. Cheyenne, Wyoming. Those same stencils and polemic sentiment. Nairobi, Kenya. Amman, Jordan.

I am a rapper introduced to hip-hop culture through commodity. My early engagements with rap music were mediated by radio, cable television, the sterilized confines of the mall’s record chain. I experienced the renegade of rap after it had been scrubbed, bleeped. I felt the furious wild style from a safe distance, witnessed the body’s pops and spins behind glass. I copied.

I, like many artists, have benefited from those who risked their bodies crossing invented boundaries. Those who risk their bodies to steal, hustle, con, bend the bars to prove another paradigm is possible. We pick and tear, wear their skin, swallow their tongues to better define ourselves. We press their remains on t-shirts long after they’ve been crushed by narrow, elitist agendas.

It’s all make believe. Institutes are machinations like constructs of race, wealth, success. A shared hallucination. All that is real and undeniable is this animal need to survive, the human desire to exist after the flesh dissolves.

There will always be those who loiter outside our hallowed halls, those who haven’t a taste for stinky cheese. And if they are not greeted, they will introduce themselves.

It will not be creased nor presentable. It will test the patience of the liberal and learned. We will have to stop for a moment, mute ourselves, and think about what it really means.