THE WORDS AND MUSIC OF ICE CUBE

Gail Hilson Woldu

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The Words and Music of Ice Cube

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Gail Hilson Woldu

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Robert Collins Hilson (1928–1989), and to my mother, Jacqueline Dixon Hilson

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Series Foreword

Although the term, *Singer-Songwriters,* might most frequently be associated with a cadre of musicians of the early 1970s such as Paul Simon, James Taylor, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, and Carole King, the Praeger Singer-Songwriter Collection defines singer-songwriters more broadly, both in terms of style and in terms of time period. The series includes volumes on musicians who have been active from approximately the 1960s through the present. Musicians who write and record in folk, rock, soul, hip-hop, country, and various hybrids of these styles will be represented. Therefore, some of the early 1970s introspective singer-songwriters named above will be included, but not exclusively.

What do the individuals included in this series have in common? Some have never collaborated as writers. But, while some have done so, all have written and recorded commercially successful and/or historically important music *and* lyrics at some point in their careers.

The authors who contribute to the series also exhibit diversity. Some are scholars who are trained primarily as musicians, while others have such areas of specialization as American studies, history, sociology, popular culture studies, literature, and rhetoric. The authors share a high level of scholarship, accessibility in their writing, and a true insight into the work of the artists they study. The authors are also focused on the output of their subjects and how it relates to their subject's biography and the society around them; however, biography in and of itself is not a major focus of the books in this series.

Given the diversity of the musicians who are the subject of books in this series, and given the diversity of viewpoint of the authors, volumes in the

series will differ from book to book. All, however, will be organized chronologically around the compositions and recorded performances of their subjects. All of the books in the series should also serve as listeners' guides to the music of their subjects, making them companions to the artists' recorded output.

James E. Perone
Series Editor

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I am very grateful to many people for their support and advice over the many stages of this project. My students at Trinity College were without question my biggest sources of inspiration and guidance, especially those who were part of my first forays, in the late 1990s, into the world of hip-hop culture. In particular, I thank Trinity alumni Afua Atta-Mensah, Cornell Burnett, Pharoah Cranston, Ashley Hammarth, Ed Jacobs, Tanya Jones, Nell McCarthy, and Rachel Walden, all members of "Current Trends in Black Music Expression," which was Trinity's first formally organized class on hip-hop. Thanks, too, to Zee Santiago, a key player in Trinity's Temple of Hip-Hop, and to Shanice Smith, my research assistant, who helped me organize my messy hip-hop files during the summer of 2008.

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Introduction: The Reinventions of Ice Cube

I rap. I produce. I write. I act. I direct.

—Ice Cube, 1998

In January 1996, journalist Frank Williams wrote a whimsical piece for *The Source* called "Hip-Hop Is . . ." in which he defined hip-hop in a series of disjunct descriptors.[1] Some are straightforward statements ("Hip-hop is the Black existence"); others are single words ("Hope. Perseverance."); others still are complex and multilayered, focused on the paradoxes of the genre and the culture ("Hip-hop is tempting sexism and the glorification of a wack state of genocidal abyss" and "Midsummer night fantasies conjured up by ghetto princesses and concrete princes in projects everywhere").[2] Williams cites three men by name, explaining their iconic status in African American culture and linking them to hip-hop's world: Langston Hughes, Harlem Renaissance poet, novelist, and playwright; Eazy-E; and Ice Cube.[3] In Williams's idealized world, Hughes would come face to face with rappers Das EFX, and Eazy-E's gravesite would be, like its occupant, a tangible emblem of hip-hop culture. Of the three, the name "Ice Cube" stood alone, in 1996, needing neither qualifier nor explanation; his name alone, in Williams's eyes, was an unequivocal symbol of hip-hop culture.

Two years later, in 1998, journalist Scoop Jackson interviewed Ice Cube for *XXL,* a hip-hop magazine at that time in its infancy. Jackson asked Ice Cube about his metamorphoses (from gangsta rapper to Hollywood actor, producer, and writer) and pondered whether he "mattered" anymore to

hip-hop's audiences.[4] Ice Cube's response—that hip-hop did not define him and that he was comfortable with the range of his professional activity—was important, but less significant than the responses of Darryl James, who was at the time editor of *Rap Sheet,* and the legendary Chuck D of Public Enemy. James called Ice Cube "the most visible entity for the West Coast" and said, "Asking if Ice Cube still matters to hip hop is like asking if James Brown still matters to black music."[5] Chuck D's response was even more imperative, for it pointed to the single most noteworthy aspect of Ice Cube's career: his ability to redefine himself—or, using Chuck D's words, "his innate ability to reinvent himself" at critical junctures.[6]

This book is largely about Ice Cube's reinventions. From his pivotal recordings with NWA in the late 1980s through his family films of the early 2000s and back again to gangsta rap in 2008, Ice Cube is all about the power of transformation—and, in his case, the ironies, power, and importance of moving forward while looking back. In fact, well-known hip-hop journalist Cheo Hodari Coker addressed these issues in a lengthy article on Ice Cube in *XXL* called "Return of the Gangsta" (June 2008). Focusing on Ice Cube's circular path, Coker speaks of Ice Cube's "hip-hop irrelevancy" through much of the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as the excitement generated by his upcoming album, *Raw Footage,* which is alive with politically-conscious rap and recorded on Ice Cube's own Lench Mob label.[7] The album's first single, "Gangsta Rap Made Me Do It," also released as a video, is gangsta rap at its best: it lampoons social culture pundits and the media for using gangsta rap as a convenient scapegoat for all of the woes of inner cities, and it calls attention to some of the hottest headline news stories and personalities of the early twenty-first century, among them disgraced radio personality Don Imus, the massacres at Columbine High School and Virginia Polytechnic Institute, and the war in Iraq. The production of this album, Ice Cube's first since *Laugh Now, Cry Later* (2006), is particularly remarkable in light of his other work released in 2008, including the film *First Sunday,* a comedy by Screen Gems.

Because I am concerned with exploring the variety of Ice Cube's work (his films as well as his music), my book centers on key stages in his professional career, beginning in the late 1980s and ending in 2007. In particular, I examine his song texts to uncover a style that is at once unique to Ice Cube and reflective of the social times that he sought to chronicle. As such, this study is from the perspective of the cultural historian—not the biographer—and my primary objective is to discuss the cultural significance of Ice Cube's work both within and outside the world of hip-hop. While my book is not by any stretch of the imagination a biography of Ice Cube, it contains some amount of commonly known biographical information essential to fully understanding the body of his work. As an example, it is widely known that Ice Cube's given name is O'Shea Jackson and that he was born on June 15, 1969. It is also useful to know that (1) Ice Cube attended Taft High School in the San

Fernando Valley, bussed daily from his home in South Central Los Angeles; (2) his neighborhood was a "Crip neighborhood," and, while he "managed to have some gang friends," he did so without being a gangbanger himself; and (3) he studied architectural drafting at the Phoenix Institute of Technology in Arizona following his graduation from Taft. Coker points to some of the many contradictions in Ice Cube's biography and output, writing, "Ice Cube has street credibility as a gangsta rapper. Yet you'd be hard pressed to find a parking ticket on his record. He's never spent a day in jail in his life. He's been with the same woman for more than twenty years, married for the last sixteen. Ice Cube makes street music but no longer lives the street life."[8]

The book contains five chapters. Chapter 1, "The Cultural Politics of Gangsta Rap," provides a contextual framework for the chapters focused on the gangsta idiom. I explore the roots of gangsta rap and discuss the music's popularity and controversies in the chapter's three sections. Chapter 2, "Plenty Attitude: The NWA Years, 1988–1990," looks at Ice Cube's affiliation with Niggaz With Attitude, the group widely acknowledged to have created gangsta rap. This chapter centers largely on the landmark recording *Straight Outta Compton* and considers, along the way, the pioneering work of the late Eazy-E. I begin my exploration of Ice Cube's solo recordings in chapter 3, "Early Solo Successes: 1990–1993," the longest of the book's chapters. In addition to discussing *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted, Kill at Will, Death Certificate, The Predator,* and *Lethal Injection,* the five blockbuster recordings from this period, I look at the elements of Ice Cube's musical and rhetorical style in the early 1990s. This chapter concludes with excerpts from an interview conducted in 1991 between Ice Cube and noted political activist Angela Davis, as well as a brief discussion of Ice Cube's collaborations with other recording artists. The years 1994–1999 saw Ice Cube establish himself firmly in the world of cinema as an actor, writer, director, and producer. Thus, chapter 4 is appropriately titled "Collaborations and a New Direction: 1994–1998," to underscore the importance of Ice Cube's forays into film. The chapter also includes excerpts from several noteworthy interviews: "Generation Rap," an interview with Ice Cube and poet Abiodun Oyewole of the Last Poets, a maverick pre-rap group of the early 1970s; *Rap, Race, and Equality,* a documentary that features Ice Cube and a host of hip-hop luminaries, among them Russell Simmons, Ice-T, and Queen Latifah, as well as scholar Tricia Rose and journalist Jon Pareles; "Don of the Westside," an interview conducted by Selwyn Seyfu Hinds for *The Source;* and "Bow Down," an interview by Scoop Jackson for *XXL.* Chapter 5, "Actor, Producer, Director, Screenwriter, Lyricist, Rapper: 1999–2007," focuses on a grand buffet of productions in the recording studio and on film and considers Ice Cube's dual commitments to maintaining his image as a founding father of hardcore rap and his new (and highly successful) image as a family man in mainstream family film. In this light,