

“The Chronic”—Dr. Dre (1992)

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Essay by Rashad Grove (guest post)*



Dr. Dre, c. 1992

In the spring of 1992, the city of Los Angeles erupted into a wildfire of uprisings from a fuse lit by years of racism and police brutality. On March 3, 1991, Rodney King, a Black man, was brutally beaten by Los Angeles Police Department officers during his arrest after a pursuit for driving while intoxicated on the I-210. Filmed by George Holliday, the footage showed an unarmed King on the ground being beaten by several officers. When officers were acquitted, the community responded with an uprising that left 63 people dead and 2,383 more injured. Figuratively and literally, Los Angeles was on fire.

During the same time, Andre Young a.k.a. Dr. Dre was at a professional crossroads. After forming NWA, a groundbreaking collective that featured Eazy E, Ice Cube, MC Ren, and DJ Yella, he would exit the group unceremoniously over a financial dispute. The group’s last LP, “Niggaz4Life,” saw Dre experimenting with a G-funk style of production that would later come to define his motif behind the boards.

Eventually, Dre, Marion “Suge” Knight, a former bodyguard; Dick Griffey, founder of SOLAR Records, and The D.O.C., founded Death Row Records with seed money from Michael “Harry-O” Harris, distributed by Jimmy Iovine’s Interscope Records. While the destruction was happening throughout Los Angeles, Dre settled in to work on his first solo project titled “The Chronic.”

In an interview with “Rolling Stone,” Dre spoke about the personal challenges that he faced as he cast out his vision for his debut LP. “I needed a record to come out. I was broke. I didn’t receive one fuckin’ quarter in the year of ’92, because Ruthless spent the year trying to figure out ways not to pay me so that I’d come back on my hands and knees. If I had to go back home living with my mom, that wasn’t going to happen,” Dre recalled.

In June 1992, recording sessions took place at Death Row Studios in Los Angeles and at Bernie Grundman Mastering in Hollywood. The resulting album is a sonic masterpiece that serves as the soundtrack to the uprisings that were taking place in Los Angeles and for the raw, unbridled energy of Dre creating music on his own terms. Enlisting a crop of burgeoning talent including

Snoop Doggy Dogg (as he was known then), RBX, Lady of Rage, The Dogg Pound, Nate Dogg, Jewell, and Dr. Dre's step-brother, Warren G, the moment was the perfect storm for one of the greatest albums ever to be unleashed on the world.

"Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang" was released as the album's first single on November 19, 1992 and it became the blueprint for the G-funk sound, with funk and soul samples, high-pitched synthesizers, and deep bass grooves that Dre had mastered adding to his mystic reputation as the ultimate perfectionist. Although he didn't invent G-funk (Gregory "Big Hutch" Hutchinson, a.k.a. Cold 187um of Above the Law is credited as the originator), without question, Dre ushered the sub-genre into the mainstream.

After introducing Snoop to the world on "Deep Cover," the Long Beach MC's star power was undeniable with classic lyrics such as: *"One, two, three and to the fo'/Snoop Doggy Dogg and Dr. Dre is at the do'/Ready to make an entrance, so back on up/'Cause you know we're 'bout to rip, shit up/Gimme the microphone first, so I can bust like a bubble/Compton and Long Beach together, now you know you in trouble."* The song is the mission statement for the album. Adroitly, sampling Leon Haywood's "I Want'a Do Something Freaky to You," "Deep" went to number two on the "Billboard" Hot 100 and sold over a million copies. The song was also nominated for Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group at the 1994 Grammy Awards.

Although departed from Ruthless Records, Eazy-E was the target of many diss tracks on the album including the second single "Dre Day." Utilizing a slowed-down version of Funkadelic's "(Not Just) Knee Deep," Dre and Snoop also took aim at former NWA manager Jerry Heller, Miami hip hop legend Luke Campbell, New York rapper Tim Dog, and they made took some subtle jabs at Ice Cube.

"Let Me Ride," the LP's third and final single, personifies G-funk. It features a sample and in the interpolation of the chorus of the 1976 Parliament song "Mothership Connection (Star Child)," which itself quotes the Negro spiritual "Swing Down Sweet Chariot." Making it to #34, "Let Me Ride" won a Grammy Award for Best Rap Solo Performance during the 1994 Grammy Awards.

The true test of an LP is the album cuts and "The Chronic" is full of them. "The Day The N****az Took Over" captures the spirit of the social unrest of the LA uprisings. In the track, live audio from one of the participants gives the song even more authenticity....

"Lil Ghetto Boy" gives social commentary on the state of affairs of Black people who were suffering indignities in unimaginable ways. Donny Hathaway's haunting tenor echoes throughout the track as Dre and Snoop describe the existential reality that Black people were and are still encountering.

"Lyrical Gangbang" featuring The Lady of Rage, Kurupt, and RBX, is easily one of the hardest posse cuts of West Coast rap and one of the best of the era.

Undoubtedly, though, the star of "The Chronic" is Dre's masterful production. Using the timeless grooves of Parliament Funkadelic as his North Star, Dre seamlessly wielded samples

with live instrumentation that created a unique sound that caused a seismic shift in the hip hop landscape. From hilarious skits to intricate sequencing, “The Chronic” would become the template for rap albums for years to come.

Over 30 years later, “The Chronic” remains the Holy Grail of West Coast rap and one of the most heralded albums in the history of the genre. At the time of its initial release, “The Chronic” debuted at number three on “Billboard” 200, at number one on the Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums, and went on to sell over three million copies. One of the biggest LPs of the year was a gangsta rap album.

“The Chronic” also announced Death Row’s new reign of dominance in rap music as the best-selling rap label in the industry until the mid-nineties. It would launch Snoop Doggy Dogg, Tha Dogg Pound, Lady of Rage, and Warren G into superstars in their own right. While the album has its fair share of misogyny and violence that was typical of gangsta rap of the genre, Dre’s musical dexterity is on full display as the album is a time capsule of the Los Angeles of that era.

In his exceptional career, Dre has gone on to create many albums and songs that are regarded as classics but “The Chronic” remains his greatest artistic statement. Dre left no stone unturned as he poured all his brilliance and all of himself into the album. “The Chronic” is a watershed moment in hip hop and American culture. It’s a body of work that transformed popular music forever.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.