

**Let the World Listen Right: Freestyle Hip-Hop at
the Contemporary Crossroads of the Mississippi
Delta**

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ABSTRACT

LET THE WORLD LISTEN RIGHT: Freestyle Hip-Hop at the Contemporary
Crossroads of the Mississippi Delta
(Under the direction of William R. Ferris)

Hip-hop in the Mississippi Delta is defined by the interaction of Diasporic aesthetic practice, local cultural tradition and global networks. Through collaborative ethnographic work with Delta hip-hop artists and the community that surrounds them, I explore the ways in which these forces influence the form and function of expressive culture in the area. Because the music of the region has been a site of intensive ethnographic collection for over a century, I will draw from scholarship on traditional Delta music to demonstrate its relationship to contemporary styles. Today, the freestyle hip-hop artist has taken on the prominent role once reserved for the bluesman. Rather than representing a break with the blues tradition, Delta hip-hop carries on many of the stylistic traits, performance techniques and functions of the blues. In its relationship to the blues, Delta freestyle hip-hop demonstrates the dynamic nature of Afrodiasporic folklore.

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Tim Gordon, my partner in ethnography and life, made this research possible and provided many of the photos within. I may never have seen my first juke joint without his unending support.

DEDICATION

This piece is dedicated to Rebecca Hood-Adams, who loves the Mississippi Delta infinitely. This work has been buoyed by our laughter.

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INTRODUCTION: At the Crossroads

The crossroads of East Tallahatchie and Martin Luther King lie amongst the crumbling ruins of Clarksdale, Mississippi's New World District. They also mark the epicenter of American music, tracing the faint outline of ancient Native American trade



The Illinois Line railroad tracks divide Clarksdale in two

routes that first brought civilization to the land, intertwining with the Mississippi and Sunflower Rivers and cutting over burial mounds that served to raise high pathways, dry from yearly floods.

These routes were once labeled Highways 61 and 49. They were the famed blues highways filled with traveling, working, creating and living blues people. Delta bluesman Robert Johnson is said by some to have sold his soul at this very location, trading with the devil for a set of guitar licks in the 1920s.

This lost black downtown has been dwindling since the dawn of the automated cotton thresher. That, along with a new unbridled Southern bigotry and new industry up north sparked the Great Migration north in the first half of the 20th Century. Around the way lie the footprints and skeletons of some of the world's earliest blues venues. Yellow construction tape marks buildings dangerously damaged by the elements; stripes

of orange paint delineate those due for demolition. Hand-painted signs that once advertised haircuts and sno-cones fade from storefronts. The defunct chitlin' circuit haunts of local players Ike Turner, John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters crumble. Apartment houses that once provided temporary shelter for legions of train and bus riders are reduced to foundations. A few tenacious shops and venues persist from the early days, decorated with bare light bulbs and chipped hand-painted signs. Rebuilt churches enliven quiet lots on Sunday mornings. The old juke joints are nearly all gone, but Clarksdale's blues community remains, generations after the hopes that fueled the mass movement to the Promised Land were wrecked on the streets of Chicago. The bulk of the city's black population--about three quarters of its 20,000 or so residents--is annexed in a series of rental houses arranged into loose, poor neighborhoods south of the tracks.

Today the grey-paved bypasses of contemporary versions of the highways overshadow the historic crossroads. These two-lane highways are lined with Wal-Marts and Western Sizzlins as well as bright ads for nearby second-rate casinos. Local tourism officials have erroneously marked the junction of 161--the town's commercial strip--and Yazoo Avenue--an interim version of 49--with three jigsawed blue guitars, facing anywhere, lofted above a cursive sign: "Clarksdale, the Crossroads of the Blues." Nearby barbeque joints and abandoned motels sit back from the roadway; corporate gas stations, a pawnshop and a check-cashing office mark its boundaries. Here, in its neon desperation to create substance from nothing, Clarksdale, Mississippi resembles any American ghetto.

These constructed and controlled crossroads mark the heart of a flourishing blues tourism. At midnight, one might find a Japanese or Norwegian tourist clutching a

guitar at this imagined landmark, waiting for the large black trickster devil to approach, tune his instrument and imbue him with blues virtuosity. The enthusiastic visitor glibly tramples the shrubs surrounding the proud sign in his desire for the world's most substantial souvenir.

Countless rock'n'blues revivalists have named albums after landmarks at or near this spot. Their aim is true: they revere the blues and its practitioners. Their well-intended dollars have the



Abe's Barbeque, at the junction of Highways 161 and 49

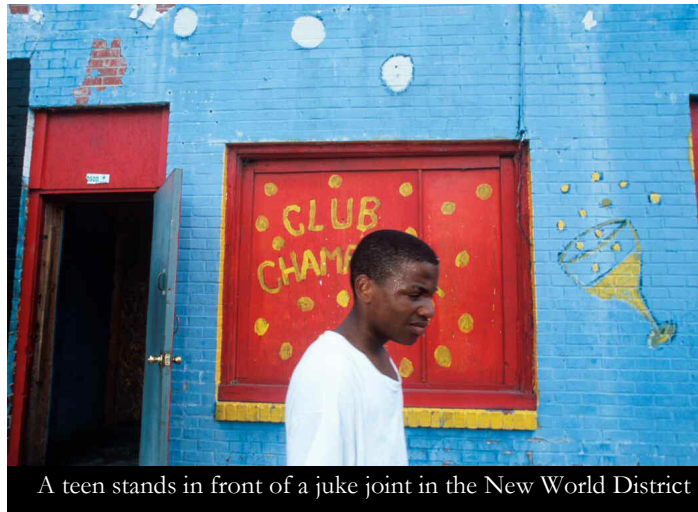
potential to economically invigorate, if not transform, the region. They frequent juke joints, photograph gravestones, erect museums. They write books.

Literary works about the Delta blues often begin as the brave young ethnographer enters the region from the northern reaches of Highway 61. This narrative echoes through scores of writings: blues traveler looks Southward wistfully, boards vehicle, glides in a straight line past Memphis deep into the earthy, moist Delta. These gendered narratives are patterned on Joseph Conrad's carnal description of the European descent into the African Heart of Darkness. The anthropologist/journalist/explorer enters into this strange land and dips down into the earthly cultural well, omniscient, from his gliding vessel. He catalogues his encounters, strange and quaint.

I entered the Delta not from the northern reaches of the Blues Highway, but from dusty Highway 49 in the West, over the Mississippi River from Arkansas, slowly losing my long race with the setting sun. I first saw the Mississippi Delta by the dusky light of a summer sunset; my notion of the region was, at best, half-lit. The Delta of my imagination was pieced together from pop-culture remnants: rock songs about the levee, WPA photographs of wizened black grandmothers, fiery films about the deadly civil rights struggle. After years of piano and guitar lessons and a few semesters of experience at my college radio station, I moved to San Francisco, where through a series of jobs at independent record stores and a frustrating stab at freelance music journalism, I continued to study the roots of the music I loved so much. In a little used bookstore in Oakland, I came across two books that turned me southward: Leroi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka)'s *Blues People* and William R. Ferris' *Blues from the Delta*. The former set the basis for my understanding of black music. The latter set my sights on my choice of Clarksdale, Mississippi as a site of further study. Frustrated with the War in Iraq and fed up with the empty gestures of urban hipster life, I convinced my boyfriend of two years, Tim Gordon, to give up our tiny studio in the Tenderloin district for a new perspective on the American landscape. We counted our pennies, bought a rusty '69 Ford Econoline with wooden doors in back, and sought an unknown Deep South. It was a romantic and gritty ride. After numerous breakdowns, blowouts and wire transfers, we finally made it to the crossroads. Tim and I drove up to a blaze orange house on Sunflower Avenue and asked the two elderly black men on the front porch for directions to a hotel. Surprised and kind, they directed us to a plantation on the outskirts of town in lilting tones, straight through the crossroads of Highways 49 and 61. Here our van, burdened by 2,000 miles and a load of books and records, shuddered in exhaustion, then slumped to the

shoulder of the road. It wouldn't budge. At that moment, the crossroads became the center of my world.

I remember approaching the crossroads in a kind of slow motion. Sweat sticks on the upper lips and temples of kids in the street, spreading glints of captured sunlight across their taut faces. The mosquito truck drives by, its thick white clouds of pesticide lingering under the spare lamplight of the deserted downtown streets like a cotton blanket. The kids appear from nowhere and envelop themselves in its haze. The difference between the land and the sky is almost imperceptible except for a series of streaks of dim red light creeping from behind



A teen stands in front of a juke joint in the New World District

heavily curtained windows. There is life inside these rooms. I hear its deep music vibrating the air.

I walked away from our broken van and into what would be the most important year of my life. Thirteen months in the Mississippi Delta would change me forever and redefine my notions of family and friendship, self and the American South. I approached the music of the Mississippi Delta as an interloper, standing outside of the sounds emanating from cracked bedroom windows, chapel doors, rattling trunks. By the time the cotton bolls dried on the stem next summer, I would be wrapped in the richly textured juke joints and living rooms of the Mississippi Delta. I would learn the language of the blues through a series of teachings and trials; from the hard pews of a little white

church house, on the front porch of a close friend, in the back seat of a police car. To understand the Mississippi Delta is to encounter the blues on its own terms, to stand at the crossroads of the known and the emergent, the living and the dead. In my year at the crossroads, I came to learn about myself, to make decisions that would affect me for the rest of my life. My heart has been breaking for the Mississippi Delta ever since. In the Mississippi Delta, I have found the salve for my breaking heart.

Today, spotty catfish farms and third-rate casinos have been built over old Delta plantations, and Wal-Mart is the new company store, offering its revolving group of employees six dollars an hour and a place to spend it. But behind the eggshell of modernity, the substance of the sharecropping society remains: infant mortality rates are among the highest in the nation; illiteracy, illness and malnutrition reign; unemployment is phenomenally rampant. The economy is growing steadily more precarious as small



Clarksdale's reverence for the past and globalized modernity

businesses and factories abandon the Delta for cheaper foreign labor. Meanwhile, young people face stifling economic odds: piecemeal formal educations and a desperate job market. The few who make it, who manage to find a decent

job, are paid substandard wages, a result of the tenacious institutions created by reconstruction-era planters to keep sharecroppers under control. A century and a half after emancipation, circumstances remain oppressive for black residents of the Mississippi Delta.

Millennial U.S. Census data show that 45% of Coahoma County children live in poverty. Official unemployment figures hover around 14% when cotton ginning ends, and scores of families live in boarded-up shotgun shacks without electricity or running water. The train no longer runs through Clarksdale to take sharecroppers to the Northern promised land, and Highway 61 no longer cuts through its historic African American business district, which is burning to the ground, building by building. A handful of juke joints remain, spottily patronized by out-of-town tourists seeking the “authentic” Delta blues experience. Here, they clumsily “jam” with their shiny harmonicas and hunt the old, poor bluesman with whom they can snap uncomfortable photos.

The blues wasn’t always withering with age. During its heyday in the early 20th century, blues were created by young black people as a soundtrack for dance, a music of sadness, a poetry of protest, an expression of love and sexuality and--most importantly--an assertion of black strength and power. Today, from the corners of the Brickyard, a neighborhood delineated by piles of abandoned industrial debris, a new blues is rising in the Mississippi Delta, one created by and for young African American people. On Saturday night, old Chevys with big rims bump beats



“Singing Barber” Wade Walton’s place, Clarksdale

from their trunks as young people gather on street corners, in clubs and behind the barbeque stand to socialize. Here, they meet and they rap. They improvise rhymes in

greeting, in introduction and in competition, referencing popular songs from the radio and sayings from around the way. Some work into a verbal duel that lasts until one participant fails to come up with a sufficiently witty rhyme in good time. The most accomplished rappers perform longer pieces that deal with their history, the area they are from, the people with whom they are standing, and the possibilities of the night at hand.

To the outsider, Delta hip-hop might sound like echoes of the popular hip-hop filtered through the waves of commercial radio or BET videos. To those who live its language, the medium offers a site for social expression with many layers of creativity and meaning. Today, the freestyle hip-hop artist has taken on the prominent role once reserved for the bluesman. Rather than representing a break with the indelible blues tradition, hip-hop from the Mississippi Delta carries on many of the stylistic traits, performance techniques and functions of the blues. Musical talk has been the primary expressive form in the Delta from the moment black Americans drained and cleared its farmland. Freestyle hip-hop, the most recent iteration of this powerful expressive combination, manifests the blues aesthetic and connects its practitioners to the deep well of Afrodiasporic folklore. The tradition is dynamic: the sound changes on the surface, rhythms update themselves, and lyrics speak to contemporary circumstances, but identity, tradition and history are grounded in every beat

Delta hip-hop performance is also inextricably tied to the urban hip-hop movement. Certain black styles translate easily over the waves of commercial radio and television, from RocaWear to Neptunes-produced hip-hop hits. This cultural call-and-response ties the urban and agrarian ghettos. Chicago's South and West Sides, East St. Louis and Southern California's Long Beach are home to former residents of the Delta and their families. Young people from these communities spend summers in the Delta

with grandparents and cousins. Some entire families move back and forth from these areas as economic circumstances demand. Connected by the ties of family and a shared tradition, inner city hip-hop draws from agrarian folk traditions developed before the Great Migration, and in return jibes with the oral culture already present in this southern corner of the African American Diaspora.

Nommo, according to scholar Molefi Kete Asante, is the “life-giving power of the word” upon which Afrodiasporic culture is structured.¹ Essential to this power is the element of transformation, through which slavery, the central historical fact of African American existence, is transcended. By mastering *nommo*, a practitioner harnesses and directs this transformative power for the sake of his or her community, countering the effects of institutionalized racism. “What is clear is that the black leaders who articulated and articulate the grievances felt by the masses have always understood the power of the word in the black community,”² Asante states. The master of words holds an elevated



Sign from Po' Monkey's juke joint, Merigold, MS

position of leadership within the African Diaspora. For African American residents of the Mississippi Delta, such transformation is essential to surviving the stifling conditions of everyday life. Missing paychecks are made,

¹ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1987) 83-86.

² Asante.87.

by community potluck into plates of catfish, discarded junk is resurrected in the form of vivid folk art, and the institutionalized lack of “America’s Ethiopia”³ is converted, by the power of the word, into a vibrant universe of black cultural production.

The master of words has always held a central role in the black Delta community, as exemplified by the strong voices the region produced over the years. Sam Cooke, Muddy Waters, Memphis Minnie, Pops Staples, Fannie Lou Hamer, Reverend C.L. Franklin and Robert Johnson all came from the Mississippi Delta. Each of these voices has reached from the flood plains of the Delta to a global resonance. The country preacher and the blues shouter are omnipresent, as are the gospel singer and children playing rhyming games. Young Delta hip-hop artists such as Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams combine popular hip-hop formal elements with the regional black experience to command that transformative power. As a freestyle hip-hop artist, TopNotch has cultivated in himself, and duly achieved, the kind of leadership that matters to young people in the contemporary Mississippi Delta. Like the bluesman, country preacher, orator and gospel singer before him, TopNotch has earned a position of leadership and respect within his community by proving his talent with nommo. To young Clarksdalians who grew up with the blues as well as portable boom boxes and L.L. Cool J on TV, the hip-hop artist speaks to the younger generation. As citizens of an Afrocentric state they call the Dirty South, young people in the Delta stand in two realms: the hip-hop nation and the contemporary American South.

Hip-hop in the Mississippi Delta is defined by the interaction of Afrodiasporic aesthetic practice, local cultural tradition and global networks. I worked in close

³ Jesse Jackson used this term to describe the Delta after his 1985 visit to the region.

collaboration with artists and community members in the Mississippi Delta to document and interpret the ways in which these forces influence the form and function of expressive culture in the area. Because the music of the region has been a site of intensive ethnographic collection for over a century, we are furnished with a wealth of historical scholarship on the musical and oral expression of the Delta in light of the region's sociocultural development. My study represents a contemporary chapter in this canon, compiled with the cooperation and approval of many residents of the Delta themselves. The story of this community does not end with the waning sound of the acoustic Delta bluesman. Neither does the strength of their resistance to oppressive economic institutions, nor their commitment to family, education and expression.

Books about the Mississippi Delta, so often written by white ethnographers, foreground the politics of representation. In an atmosphere of intense international curiosity surrounding the *Land where Blues Began*⁴, popular representations of the Delta hold the power to affect the course of tourism development. My study explores the possibility that the blues community preserves culture on its own terms; that instead of fading away, the blues defies the strains of time by updating and strengthening itself, remaining relevant to the community's contemporary needs. The people of the Mississippi Delta not only recognize the value of their music; they center their lives on it. The dynamic nature of African American music defies genre labels and historical definitions, which in turn frustrates a dominant market that relies on product branding. The market will not sell what it cannot define. If the blues cannot be fit in a box, then it cannot be labeled, priced or controlled. By design, black music resists commodification.

⁴ The title of Alan Lomax's popular 1993 Delta blues ethnography.

It offers an alternative, community-centered script that begs surface interpretation by the dominant culture while remaining under the control of its practitioners, embedded in their own communities.

The commercial hip-hop that filters through the airwaves, designed by producers to appeal to dominant tastes, represents only the tip-edge of African American musical creativity. For every Fifty Cent, a thousand MCs spit realities and dreams on the sidewalks of their 'hoods. This ethnography explores the world of Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams and his crew, whose diligent work in creating, chronicling and advocating through rhyme has earned them a privileged place in the community life of Clarksdale, Mississippi.

Preservation is important. We strengthen our cultural understandings by remembering and celebrating the work of past masters. At the same time, the efforts of contemporary inheritors of the blues tradition deserve recognition and support. In listening to the blues, gospel, hip-hop and other regional musics, outsiders are challenged to learn the language of the Mississippi Delta: to train the ear to a deeper tune. In doing so, I have had to come to terms with the boundaries of my own understandings. The fullness of the story of Delta music can only be told with the collaboration of practitioners of the living blues. Through their words, their rhythm and rhyme, a world of meaning emerges.

CHAPTER ONE: This Game Is for Life

...Black rap music is primarily the musical expression of the paradoxical cry of desperation and celebration...Without a utopian dimension—without transcendence from or opposition to evil—there can be no struggle, no hope, no meaning.

-Cornel West¹

Red's Juke Joint, one of many sprinkled throughout the abandoned downtowns of the Mississippi Delta, is situated on the boundary of Clarksdale's historically black New World District. Beneath its foundation are the edges of ancient Tunica burial mounds. These Native American ceremonial ridges, packed architecturally with loamy soil and ancestral bodies, doubled as powerful levees for the once-mighty Sunflower River, which runs behind Red's establishment



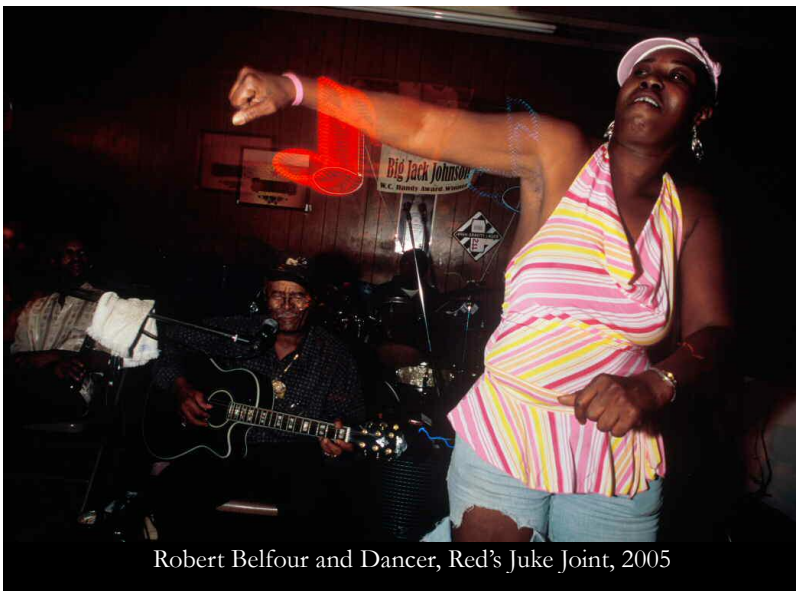
Red's Juke Joint by day, Sunflower Avenue, Clarksdale

and a barrier of dense thickets of tall grass and cane break. From the front door of the bare plywood building, the looming stone sculpture of a sorrowful angel can be seen by the lamplight of Grange Cemetery, where the graves of the white town founders are decorated with confederate flags yearly.

¹Cornel West. *The Cornel West Reader*. (Basic Cintas Books, New York 1989) 482-483.

“I’ve got the river behind me and the graveyard in front of me,” shouts Red from his stool outside the club on a slow Sunday night, a wry smile on his face. “That there is my guardian angel. This game is for LIFE!” His eyes are hidden behind a pair of deep red shades despite the blackness of the night.

At Red’s, the beers are huge and cold and insulated with thick swaths of brown paper towels. The management prefers to use colored light bulbs, mostly red, that peek out from bends in the walls to give the room a surreal, warm glow. Glossy posters of sexy girls in hot pants are thumbtacked throughout the room, nearly covering the dubious holes leaking light through the bathroom walls. At the back of the room, just left of the cove that holds the old pool table, a two-foot-tall mirrored plaque decorates the wall. It reads, “BUDWEISER, King of Beers” and features a silk-screened photo of an African tribal King, complete with war paint and a spear, gazing down at the club’s



Robert Belfour and Dancer, Red’s Juke Joint, 2005

patrons in a powerful antiphony to the crumbling white angel outside. This was one of a cynical series of advertisements the beer company made for black clubs during the Black Power

movement of the 1970s, and I have seen them frequently both in the juke joints of the Delta and in the little bars in my old neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Oakland. Red doesn’t seem concerned about the politics of the object.

“Don’t mess with me,” he often says, pointing toward the plaque, “Or my Uncle Shaka Zulu up there will get you. I kill for FUN!” He chuckles, an awkward lazy eye peeking above his shades. I shake his hand and enter. In the three years since my arrival in the Delta, Red’s establishment has shifted reputations: once considered a dangerous dive for only the bravest of white locals, Red’s is now considered the seat of Delta blues authenticity by tourists and tourism-friendly white locals alike.

But what appears to be a dive to outsiders in fact contains richness far beyond the interiors of corporate rock’n’blues joints of Middle American renovated downtowns. Those are festooned with famous guitars in acetate cases, framed record albums nailed to the wall, flavored martini specials. Red’s is a jewelbox of Delta aesthetics; the use of color, surface and texture combine to create an intensely social and creatively textured experience. Red’s may have been composed from worn materials, but in its use of the



The author and Red, Clarksdale, 2007

familiar, the juke joint retains a wealth of local meaning, history and style. Disco mirrors lining the near wall, a pool table, dramatic lighting, and a booming sound system pieced together from salvaged amplifiers contribute to an assemblage that, although tinged with wear from the destructive climate, functions perfectly as a stimulating and well-equipped space for group creativity. Red, a shrewd businessman with a son in a science Ph.D. program at Mississippi State, consciously cultivates a double image for his spot: it’s both

an outsider's juke joint and a local's club. The club's quaint materials signal authenticity to tourists, who are often not attuned to the meaning ingrained in the handmade, custom space.

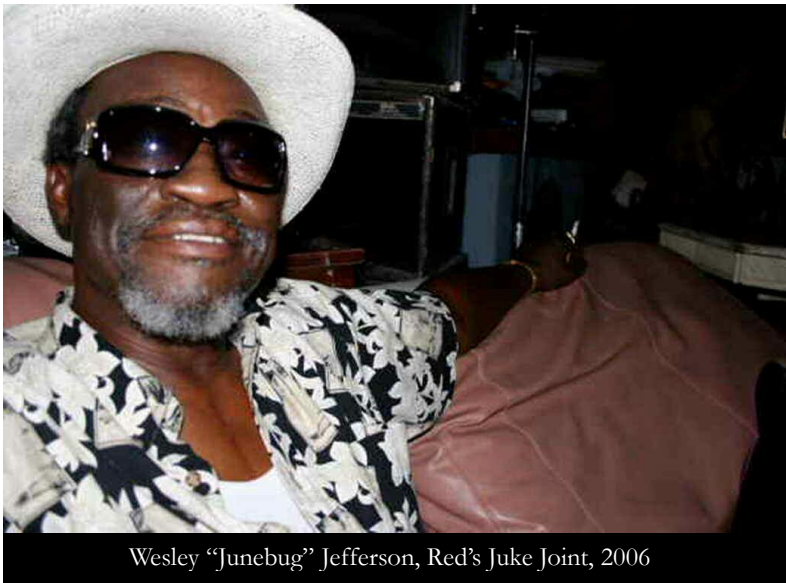
Few tourists remain in town on Sunday nights, when Red's becomes the sole domain of locals once again. Neighborhood friends move forward to occupy the entire room. Clarksdale bluesmen Big Jack Johnson, Wesley "Mississippi Junebug" Jefferson and Arthenice "Gasman" Jones tumble through on these off nights, exchanging places behind the microphone as local school kids sit in on rhythm. Big Jack "Oilman" Johnson, the revered bluesman from Clarksdale whose secondary legacy was driving the town's biggest fuel truck, has agreed to play a short, early set tonight. At around 8 p.m., the crowd swells to fifteen and Big Jack begins to tune his guitar. This juke-joint gig offers him a chance to play for his hometown friends in between the closely-scheduled blues festival gigs that are his bread and butter. It also provides him with an opportunity to experiment and improvise in ways that the festival arena does not allow. At Red's he sees the faces of his audience and hears them when they respond to a lick with a collective whelp—or don't.

As Johnson finished his set with a revved-up blues medley of traditional songs ("Will the Circle be Unbroken?", "Amazing Grace"), Clarksdale bluesman Terry "Big T" Williams takes the reins and begins to play a deep blues riff. T and Junebug alternate turns at the microphone throughout the night, rounding out a loose group of local musicians. A number of Jefferson's family members are in attendance, and many of them pick up an instrument or sing a song as the players rotate throughout the evening. The set list is improvised as one member of the group begins a song and the others jump in. The songs range from the deep, dirty blues to heart-wrenching soul songs that vary just

the tiniest bit from the local gospel sound. A set might include a Delta blues classic like Muddy Waters' "I Be's Troubled," a dirgy "make-up" song with a hodgepodge of old-time and improvised lyrics, and a contemporary R&B "Southern Soul" teaser like Theodis Ealey's "Stand up in It."

She said Theodis, men think they know what women want
But the truth about the whole thing is boy they really don't.
She said, I had a man
who thought he was the worlds greatest lover
But when you add his time up
He was just a five-minute brother
He used to lick it
Mmmm
He used to stroke it
You know one night we was makin' love he said
This thing is so damn good I wanna put it in my pipe and smoke it...
But you ain't done a dog gone thing until you stand up in it²

Wesley Jefferson is the best shade-tree mechanic in this part of the Delta; with a pinch of the fingers under the hood and a sniff of their contents, he can diagnose an



Wesley "Junebug" Jefferson, Red's Juke Joint, 2006

engine problem in seconds. He impeccably fixed up our '69 Ford Econoline van for a dime. He's married to Miss Sara Carr, daughter of legendary Jelly Roll Kings

drummer Sam Carr and the father of a number of talented children, all of whom are

² Theodis Ealey, "Stand up in It," from *Stand up in It* (Ifgam Records, B0001XAKLA, 2004).

musical, and one of whom is serving in the War on Iraq. Wesley's version of the blues is gritty but nuanced, with his wah-wah voice and stomping cadence. He is also willing to let another player step into the spotlight while he takes a beer break.

Big T tells me that he is excited to play bass with Big Jack, whom he considers an elder and a mentor. The influence of Big Jack's legendary guitar technique on Big T's style is apparent, and although Big T tends to shine in the spotlight, T is happy to spend the first half of his night behind the Oilman. Lee Williams, a 19-year-old graduate of the Delta Blues Education program, sits in on drums, which he plays with the combination of swing and precision that characterizes the Delta blues.³ An anonymous white blues tourist in an iridescent blue shirt steps in and holds his own on rhythm guitar behind the group. He donated a pocketful of cash to the musicians for the privilege. Local blues singers Razor Blade and Mr. Tater play a song from time to time as well.

Red's "stage" is actually a worn oriental area rug, about twelve by ten feet, duct-taped to the floor to take up half of the room's floor space. A huge tin tip tub, a stack of old guitar amps and P.A.s and bare floor space for dancers and revelers line the periphery of the performance space. The edges of the room are filled with little round tables and chairs for larger groups of early-arriving locals and valued regulars. Stragglers situate themselves at the bar, where an assortment of Red's friends and nervous white tourists crowd in. There is a lack of boundary between audience and performer in the Delta that gives the music its electricity; in this room, whooping and dancing with the rest, my hand tight around a Bud tall boy, I feel like I am as much a part of the music as anything.

³ The Delta Blues Education Program pairs accomplished blues musicians with grade-school and high-school students. More information can be found at www.bluesd.org.

Sitting and talking with Red is an incredible experience. He has spent a lifetime developing his “talk,” a skill that he cultivates in others by challenging them regularly. This process involves Red jibing his trainee verbally, usually with a series of clever insults (clothing, intelligence, facial structure, or—in my case--race) meant to be answered with coolness and wit. Over the course of my three years of fieldwork in the Delta, I have enjoyed an increasingly difficult series of such challenges, and although Red often leaves me speechless, we are able to engage each other in this kind of conversation for a few minutes at a time. He has told me before that he likes me because, in his words, I “know how to talk,” but I have noticed that he will often let me get away with stumbling over a response—or staring at him blankly as my mind searches unsuccessfully for one. In this situation, he turns his head and laughs kindly, ending the session without making me too uncomfortable. Or he’ll turn his attention to a less vulnerable target: “You white people sure are actin’ funny these days,” he’ll say as a long-haired light-skinned drunk meanders his way back from the liquor store on a little girl’s pink bike. “Now, I can’t argue with that,” I respond.



Audience members take turns singing, Red's Juke Joint, 2005

A night at Red's does not begin and end with the blues player's set. It's the entire aesthetic experience that matters: taste, talk, music, temperature, color, light, interaction. Movement,

collectivity and improvisation are highly valued. Style is king. Red chooses elements

carefully and incorporates them into the entirety of the club's aesthetic. Some nights, a bluesman from the hill country northeast of the Delta—T Model Ford or Robert Belfour-- plays for a crowd of five. During the musician's frequent breaks, Red entertains his customers with his boisterous talk and a game of pool. Patrons stand and dance solo to favorite Southern soul classics playing over the sound system, flirting with a desired partner. A young couple plays a game of pool or chats on the corner couch. Frequently, especially on off nights, a lady from the audience—a bluesman's daughter or a respected matron—gets up to sing a song with the band. The players hang on her first vocal riff to determine what chords to play and then launch in to meet her at the chorus. She ends her song and sits back in her chair as her friends pat her back and pour her another drink. Or the band begins a familiar riff without any particular singer at hand, daring anyone in the audience to assume the role of emcee. Sometimes a young man from the audience stands and, after singing a stanza or two, begins to speak in rhyme, addressing a loved one in improvised verse. As the audience cheers him on, he proves his wit through his freestyle oratory: impassioned, skilled and created in the moment of performance.

Delta Blues on the Coolin' Board

The Delta blues, like the crossroads at which they were conjured, call upon themes of life and death. In West African belief, the crossroads represent a horizontal line between the living and the spiritual realms and the vertical path between those two worlds.⁴ As travelers approach this powerful intersection, the spirit of Eshu-Elegba, the

⁴ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. (Vintage Books, New York 1984) 18-33.

trickster god, challenges them to account for all possible perspectives before choosing their route. This belief, carried in various forms throughout the Black Disapora, echoes through legends surrounding Delta bluesmen Robert Johnson, Tommy Johnson, Petey Wheatstraw and others. At the crossroads, it is said, these musicians traded their souls for the ability to play guitar:

Take your guitar and you go down to where a road crosses that way, where a crossroad is. Get there, be sure to get there just a little 'fore twelve o'clock that night so you know you'll be there. You have your guitar and be playing a piece sitting there by yourself. You have to go by yourself and be sitting there playing a piece. A big black man will walk up there and take your guitar, and he'll tune it. And he'll play a piece and hand it back to you. That's the way I learned how to play anything I want.⁵

These words of bluesman Tommy Johnson illustrate the symbolic power of the crossroads as a creative space between where fate is sealed. Whether Johnson actually sold his soul to the devil in this liminal space, used the crossroads as a symbol of his decision to make secular rather than sacred music, or surrounded himself in this sensational story to increase his cache as a working blues musician has been subject to speculation within and without the blues community. A trade with the devil--actual or symbolic--provided a lyrical wellspring for Robert Johnson, a popular prewar bluesman who patterned his style and his reputation on that of Tommy Johnson:

You may bury my body
down by the highway side
Baby, I don't care where you bury my
body when I'm dead and gone

You may bury my body, ooh
down by the highway side

⁵ As quoted by his brother, Rev. LeDell Johnson, In David Evans, *Tommy Johnson* (Studio Vista, London, 1971) 22-23.

So my old evil spirit
can catch a Greyhound bus and ride⁶

Johnson's lyrics embody on one hand an intimate understanding of death and a strong belief in transcendence. He laments his mortality while also suggesting an escape route: a ride north on Highway 61, across the imagined line between mortality and freedom.

Themes of death resonate throughout the cultural production of the Mississippi Delta. The verses of the prewar bluesmen reveal an intimate familiarity with the subject. The "coolin' board," an unhinged front door used to lay out recently-deceased members of the household, makes a common appearance in blues lyrics, as does the "cold, cold buryin' ground," the "lonesome graveyard," and "the shallow grave." Clarksdale bluesman Son House illustrates this gothic take on mortality in his "Death Letter Blues."

I got a letter this morning, how do you reckon it read?
"Oh, hurry, hurry, gal, you love is dead"
I got a letter this morning, how do you reckon it read?
"Oh, hurry, hurry, gal, you love is dead"

I grabbed my suitcase, I took off up the road
I got there, she was laying on the cooling board.
I grabbed my suitcase, I took on up the road
I got there, she was laying on the cooling board.⁷



Tutwiler water tower, Mississippi Delta, 2005

The starvation and sickness that were part and parcel of Delta poverty were often addressed in song, as were the environmental ravages of flooding, disease and disaster. Against the backdrop of debt

⁶ "Me and the Devil Blues" from *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* Label: (Sony, B000002757, 1990).

⁷ Son House, "Death Letter Blues" from *The Original Delta Blues* (Sony, B000007T4P, 1998).

peonage that bound black residents of the Delta to lifetimes of extreme poverty, sorrow was no stranger. A visiting team of doctors in the 1960s found “homes without running water, without electricity, without screens, in which children drink contaminated water and live with germ-bearing mosquitoes and flies everywhere around.”⁸ Few Delta residents could afford to eat more than once a day, limited to empty, nutritionless food. Starvation was the norm. Blues lyrics dealt with these issues head-on, including these lyrics about the murderous Delta flood of 1929.

So the high water was risin', I been sinkin' down
Then the water was risin', I been sinkin' down
(Spoken: Boy, that's all around)
It was fifty men and children, come to sink and drown

Oh. Lord, oh Lordy, women and grown men down
Ohhh, women and children sinkin' down
(Spoken: Lord have mercy)
I couldn't see nobody home and wasn't no one to be found⁹

As W. C. Handy, an African American bandleader who documented and brought the blues into national popularity, waited in Tutwiler for his train to Clarksdale in 1903, he encountered the Delta blues for the first time: “the weirdest music I ever heard,” played by a “lean, loose-jointed negro” who sung about his hope to escape poverty by catching a north-bound ride at a Delta railroad crossing.¹⁰

Alan Lomax, whose 1941 and 1942 Library of Congress forays into the Mississippi Delta provided the basis for his seminal book, *Land where the Blues Began*, describes the role of death in the region in lurid terms:

⁸ In James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1992) 265.

⁹ In Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (Viking Press, New York, 1991) 76-77.

¹⁰ In Cobb 277.

Country people are not afraid to look death in the face. He is familiar in their lives, especially in the violent jungle of the Delta. They have seen him in the houses drowned by the great river and in the towns splintered in tornadoes; they have seen him in the faces of the young men shot down in the gambling hall or in the guise of an old fellow who came home to die after a hard day's plowing, his body on the cooling board still bent from years stooping over the cotton rows.¹¹

Lomax's work was based in a legacy of anthropological interest in the culture and folklore of black communities in the South. After sociologists including Howard Odum and Guy B. Johnson published their early work on African American folk songs at the turn of the century, folklorists Lawrence Gellert and John and (later, his son) Alan Lomax continued to collect and compile southern African American folklore in the prewar years. The latter group, involved with the workers' movement of the 1930s and 40s, infused their work with anticapitalist understandings. Gellert found that African American folk song contained tools for political resistance and discovered the element of protest in a mode of cultural production previously regarded as docile and simple. John



and Alan Lomax helped to popularize the work of folk artists such as Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, whose songs contained jibes against the cruel masters and oppressive circumstances of the American South. In order to increase

Leadbelly's countercultural cache, the Lomaxes encouraged the singer to wear prison garb and sing work songs well after his release from prison.

¹¹ Alan. Lomax, *The Land where the Blues Began*. (Pantheon Books, New York, 1993) 14.

For Alan Lomax, who continued his family's folkloristic work with a special focus on the cultural production of Southern African Americans, the politics of representation were bound by a progressive social agenda. He took a cue from anthropologist John Dollard, who in league with Hortense Powdermaker completed an intensive ethnographic study of the Delta town of Indianola, Mississippi in the 1930s. Dollard, concerned with the need for federal poverty relief in the Delta, depicted circumstances for African American residents of the region in terms of socioeconomic caste. Faced with the dire circumstances of life behind the cotton curtain, blues people sublimated their frustration and anger in the form of cruel rhyming games and self-effacing blues lyrics.¹² Lomax, informed by these studies, did his best to document and preserve the music and culture of the blues people of the Mississippi Delta, whose struggles provided a potent example of the inequality he sought to eliminate. Fascinated with the story of Robert Johnson's trade with the devil at the crossroads, Lomax joined a group of Fisk University researchers in order to find the cursed bluesman. Instead, he found that Johnson had been poisoned to death in a land Lomax would later tout as the birthplace of the blues.

Like his father's promotion of Leadbelly, Lomax's representations of the Delta blues helped to draw public attention to the cultural work of the black southern underclass. The result was an exposure and appreciation of this music on the national stage. The Delta blues became known through folk festivals, Smithsonian Folkways records, and popular articles, and had a special appeal for the young, white middle-class Americans who sought an alternative script to mainstream postwar life. The concept of

¹² See Alan Dundes' analysis of Dollard's "The Dozens: Dialect of Insult." in Alan Dundes, *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*. (University of Mississippi Press, Jackson, Mississippi, 1990) 277-294.

the blues' birth began to intrigue fans beyond the Delta, along with a growing concern with the genre's demise. The Delta Blues, a product of the suffering caused by the pathological effects of institutionalized racism, would surely end up on the coolin' board. "Keeping the blues alive" became a mantra for the blues organizations and fans that rallied around the genre as a symbol of working-class opposition. The themes of life and death that had so deeply influenced the Delta blues had come to roost in the popular consciousness, and the legacy of Robert Johnson's violent and untimely demise grew to define popular notions Delta blues. Eventually, the Delta blues were equated with poverty and death itself instead of the act of musical transcendence symbolized by the crossroads.

The collection methods of early folklorists in the region added further constraints to the study of the Delta blues. White ethnographers were largely prohibited from entering black community spaces both by wary Delta African Americans and by local law enforcement. The latter were charged with heavily discouraging interaction between blacks and white potential agitators. Blues songs were largely collected on front porches or visitors' hotel rooms, and featured a single player, often without any accompaniment. One can imagine the trepidation with which a young black musician presented his craft—and poetry—to unfamiliar outsiders. Thus decontextualized from the spirit of community-centered performance, early recordings of Delta blues players represent a tiny window on a multifaceted musical form.

Perhaps the most substantial distortion of the blues spirit can be found amongst dominant fans and critics who tout the notion of the "real, down-home, country" blues. Many of these definitions are based on a romantic notion of blues authenticity that views the blues as a reactive form, borne of a black agrarian poverty that must be maintained in

order for the music to retain meaning. Charles Kiel calls the tendency of dominant commentators to apply these notions of authenticity to the living blues the “moldy fig mentality.”¹³ A song by the Blues Brothers, a group comprised of two white comedians who have made a career of assuming blues identities, sums up the sentiment.

You know what I’m saying
It’s kinda hard to play the blues
If you don’t have any problems

You might think I’m crazy, you might think I’m strange
The first thing in the morning I’m gonna make a change
I throw away my money, I move back to that shack
Do whatever I gotta do to get that old feelin’ back
I know I’d be feelin’ better with nothing left to lose
When times are bad, the less I had, the better I played the blues
I buy myself some turkey and wine, and howl it at the moon
‘cause I can’t play the blues in an air-conditioned room

If I should die tomorrow you can write it on my tomb
he couldn’t play the blues in an air-conditioned room¹⁴

Here, the lone black bluesman with his guitar, shoeless in a cotton field or affected with a disease, loses authenticity when equipped with a full stomach and a modicum of comfort. The blues musician begs to be returned to his state of poverty so that he can continue to create. A list of “authentic” blues traits was circulated online via websites and inboxes in 2005, featuring a checklist for blues authenticity. I received the list through fellow folklorists twice via mass e-mail, and a basic web search turns this list up on dozens of blues fansites.

HOW TO SING THE BLUES If you are new to Blues music, or like it but never really understood the why and wherefores, here are some very fundamental rules:
1. Most Blues begin with: "Woke up this morning..."...

¹³ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992).

¹⁴ The Blues Brothers, “You Can’t Play the Blues in an Air-Conditioned Room,” on *Red, White and Blues* (Turnstyle, B00000E959, 1992).

4. *The Blues is not about choice. You stuck in a ditch, you stuck in a ditch...ain't no way out...*

7. *Blues can take place in New York City but not in Hawaii or anywhere in Canada. Hard times in Minneapolis or Seattle is probably just clinical depression. Chicago, St. Louis and Kansas City are still the best places to have the Blues. You cannot have the Blues in any place that don't get rain. Exception - a place with little or no rain CAN be the blues, but only if it's hot enough to fry an egg on the sidewalk (but you can't, 'cause your baby left you and took the eggs with her).*

8. *A man with male pattern baldness ain't the Blues. A woman with male pattern baldness is. Breaking your leg 'cause you were skiing is not the Blues. Breaking your leg 'cause a alligator be chomping on it is...*

12. *No one will believe it's the Blues if you wear a suit, 'less you happen to be an old person, and you slept in it.*

13. *Do you have the right to sing the Blues?*

Yes, if:

a. you're older than dirt

b. you're blind

c. you shot a man in Memphis

d. you can't be satisfied

No, if:

a. you have all your teeth

b. you were once blind but now can see

c. the man in Memphis lived

d. you have a 401K or trust fund...

16. *If death occurs in a cheap motel or a shotgun shack, it's a Blues death. Stabbed in the back by a jealous lover is another Blues way to die.*

So are the electric chair, substance abuse and dying lonely on a broke down cot. You can't have a Blues death if you die during a tennis match or while getting liposuction...

20. *Blues Name Starter Kit*

a. name of physical infirmity (Blind, Cripple, Lame, etc.)

b. first name (see above) plus name of fruit (Lemon, Lime, Kiwi, etc.)

c. last name of President (Jefferson, Johnson, Fillmore, etc.)

For example: Blind Lime Jefferson, Pegleg Lemon Johnson or Cripple Kiwi Fillmore, etc. (Well, maybe not "Kiwi.")

21. *I don't care how tragic your life is: if you own a computer, you cannot sing the blues, period.¹⁵*

As middle-class interest in the Delta blues grew throughout the latter half of the 20th Century, the attempts of white ethnographers to fully depict suffering in the Deep South became conflated with the hegemonic politics of cool. This “everything but the

¹⁵ Origin unknown. Available at <http://www.ieee-huntsville.org/y2003/lw0306/lw0306blues.html>.

burden” mentality allowed whites to credentialize themselves in blues cool while simultaneously reinforcing the economic status quo. The stereotype of the Delta blues as a dying form fulfills a number of functions for dominant American culture. Middle-class postwar youth found a rally cry in the blues’ opposition to bourgeois norms. The popular American record industry, based on the model of minstrelsy, found a ready market for sensational depictions of the bluesman. The blues could be easily packaged, bought and sold on the popular market. If the blues was finite, able to be captured in the grooves of a record, then the music could be owned. American popular culture had found a safe vessel for its socioeconomic reckoning—sometimes tragic, sometimes supernatural, but never fully human.

Roger Abrahams, whose research in Afrodiasporic performative speech broke important new folkloristic ground, found that studies of African American culture by dominant researchers often reinforce hegemonic stereotypes of pathology. “Studies of Afro-American cultures and societies continue to be haunted by the shape-shifting, pursuing spirit of stereotypy. The deprivation and pathological arguments are the latest incarnations of this spirit, both relying on mainstream Western values and practices as norms.”¹⁶

Albert Murray, a black journalist and scholar, sought to break blues stereotypes in his 1976 book, *Stomping the Blues*. He points out that the entry on blues music in the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* describes the poetry of the blues as ‘tender, ironic, bitter, humorous, or typical expressions of deprived people...’¹⁷ He also

¹⁶ Roger Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture* (Johns Hopkins, Baltimore. 1983) 24.

¹⁷ Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1976) 74.

discusses formal definitions of the blues as a 12-bar format with a twice-repeated stanza and then a third, rhymed punch line. These definitions of the blues were representative of dominant culture's take on the blues. Murray displaced these notions with eloquence.

Not that blues music is without fundamental as well as immediate political significance and applicability. But the nature of its political dimension is not always as obvious as promoters of folk-music-as-social-commentary seem to believe. The political implication is inherent in the attitude toward experience that generates the blues-music counterstatement in the first place. It is the disposition to persevere (based on a tragic, or better still, an epic sense of life) that blues music at its best not only embodies but also stylizes, extends, elaborates and refines into art.¹⁸

To Murray, who spent a lifetime participating in the living blues arena in his Alabama community and in clubs and juke joints across the country, the blues was life-affirming, dynamic and Afrocentric in both content and form.

Nor has anybody ever been able to get rid of the blues forever either. You can only drive them away and keep them at bay for the time being. Because they are always there, as if always waiting and watching. Retirement is out of the question....all you have to do is keep them in their proper place, which is deep in the dozens, is to pat your feet and snap your fingers.¹⁹

John W. Roberts suggests that the academic concern with literal texts has limited dominant understandings of African American culture to an oversimplified, unilinear model. In the case of the Delta blues, this means a focus on decontextualized blues lyrics. On the written page, the blues might seem pathetic. But in the club on a Saturday night, they are life-affirming, energetic and dynamic.

...Because the emphasis on texts and the ethnographic assumptions and approaches which have informed the African American study of folklore over time, we know little about the Afrocentric process or the ways in

¹⁸ Murray 68.

¹⁹ Murray 258.

which Africans in America transformed their cultural forms and created a dynamic folk tradition in America.²⁰

To the community in which they are being created, performed, updated, and renewed, the Delta blues are not dying. Delta bluesman Terry “Big T” Williams finds that the music nourishes, and is in turn nourished by, the contemporary blues community. “People say that the blues is dyin’ down here. Well, every time they say that, every time it comes out of their mouth, it means the blues is still goin’ on. It actually doesn’t change. It’s still the same. What they do is modify it. They take it to another level.”²¹ In fact, the Delta blues are sustained and re-versioned by members of the blues community, who employ the spirits of community and creativity to create sustenance amidst oppression. The living blues, embedded in the context of the community-centered performance, are a tool of transcendence rather than a rattle of resignation.



Terry “Big T” Williams, Clarksdale, 2007

Catch a Greyhound Bus and Ride

Even as the specter of death seems to threaten to end the practice and practitioner of the Delta blues, the blues community continues to create music on its

²⁰ John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1989) 12-13.

²¹ Interview, Terry “Big T” Williams, blues musician, Clarksdale, Mississippi, July 13th 2006.

own terms. In the 1960s and 70s, a new wave of ethnographers undertook work on the music of the Mississippi Delta. Researchers including David Evans, Jeff Todd Titon, Paul Oliver and Samuel Charters, informed by new global discourses surrounding race and power, engaged the blues communities of the Delta in depth. Instead of relying on the observations and assumptions of established scholarship, these scholars made space for the worldviews of their consultants. Moreover, this second round of folkloristic collection in the Delta blues allowed for a look at the changes—and similarities—of the music over time.

William R. Ferris, a lifelong Mississippi resident, spent many years building a relationship with the blues community of the Mississippi Delta. Working closely with a number of Delta bluesmen, including James “Son” Thomas, “Pine Top” Floyd and Wade Walton, Ferris was invited into the interior Afrocentric spaces of the Delta: house parties, juke joints and churches. Here, he witnessed the music of the Delta within the richness of its context. In his book on the topic, *Blues from the Delta*, as well as a series of short films, Ferris privileges the voices of the blues community, and in doing so uncovers aspects of the blues overlooked by many previous researchers. Ferris showed that Delta blues singers simultaneously work from established lyrics while adding improvisatory lines called *make-ups*, in which they draw from the situation at hand to create emergent meaning. His collection shows a rich and vibrant set of cultural connections between the blues community of the Delta and those of urban areas, especially Chicago. Most importantly, his work highlights the nature of the blues as a tool of commiseration and of transcendence. In this sense, “singing the blues” is the salve for “having the blues.” Blues “talker” Robert Shaw of Memphis illustrates this dichotomy:

Everything here is the blues. It goes back to feelings. How you feel today. You know blues has always been something that you don't have to be black to have the blues. You can have blues, wake up in the morning and something is blue on you—you understand what I'm talking about? Around your bed, and you done got blue, you understand? [...]
 Now I'm going to tell you about the life of the blues. Now this is the blues:
 Living ain't easy and times are tough.
 Money is scarce, and we all can't get enough.
 Now my insurance is lapsed and food is low,
 And the landlord is knockin' at my door.
 Last night I dreamed I died,
 The undertaker came to take me for a ride.
 I couldn't afford a casket,
 And embalming was so high,
 I got up from my sick bed because I was too poor to die.
 Now ain't that blue? ²²

In his stylized narrative, Shaw, a hat salesman at Lansky's men's shop on Memphis' famed Beale Street, demonstrates the transcendent qualities of the blues in two ways. First, he shows how quick wit can help even the unluckiest of souls to rise from the dead. In his adaptation of blues stylings to unaccompanied oral poetry, Shaw also shows how easily the blues can shift in form while retaining a core aesthetic. By connecting the Delta blues to sermons, rhyming games (and other "blues talk"), gospel music and deejay styles, Ferris shows the plasticity of the blues genre and breaks stereotypes of the blues as a rigid, dated and tragic expressive mode.

Ferris' findings dovetailed with those of researchers John W. Work and Samuel Adams, African American researchers from Fisk University who conducted extended ethnographic work in the music and culture of the Mississippi Delta. These scholars initiated the Coahoma County study through which Alan Lomax visited the Delta in 1941 and 1942. According to recent historical discoveries by music researchers Robert

²² William Ferris, *Give my Poor Heart Ease*, 1975. Available at www.folkstreams.net.

Gordon and Bruce Nemerov, the Fisk scholars were pressured to include Lomax (at that time, a Library of Congress songcatcher) in their research plans. As the Fisk scholars spent years gathering contextual ethnographic information (including embedding themselves in the community as low-wage cotton pickers), Lomax made do with a couple short excursions. While Lomax's self-described research methods involved short visits with artists, the Fisk scholars focused on gathering rich contextual information. By cataloguing the eclectic mix of records available on local jukeboxes, they found that the Delta blues, rather than being created in a vacuum, were created in conversation with global musical styles. John Work was the first outside researcher to locate a young Muddy Waters on a plantation near Clarksdale, as well as draw important connections between children's games, sacred song, vernacular speech and the Delta blues. The work of the Fisk scholars was purportedly misplaced by the Library of Congress in the 1940s and later recovered in Lomax's personal archive. If their findings regarding the cosmopolitan and open-ended nature of the genre had been released in their time, they might have broken open the notions of authenticity that have nearly parochialized and dated the Delta blues to death.

Robert Farris Thompson's intertextual studies of Afrodiasporic expressive modes sparked groundbreaking discourses on the function of aesthetics in cultural meaning-making in the 1970s and '80s. His research showed black culture as neither a function of race nor a set of formal elements, but instead a series of aesthetic signifiers including rhythm, coolness, flash, polyphony, and improvisation. Identity could be translated from music to textiles to dance without losing meaning. These expressive elements retain currency by lending themselves to new interpretations. Lawrence Levine, in his *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, finds that African American song, narrative

and speech provide a shining example of culture's dynamic nature. According to Levine, "culture is not a fixed condition but a process: the product of interaction between the past and the present."²³ In this nexus, he concludes, lies the transcendent quality of black verbal art.

Again and again oral expressive culture reveals a pattern of simultaneous acculturation and revitalization...Black verbal art makes clear that a people is, in Ralph Ellison's phrase, "more than the sum of its brutalization." "We had joys back there in St. Louis," Dick Gregory remembered in his account of his poverty-stricken youth, "joys that made us want to live just as surely as the pains taught us how to live."²⁴

Portia Maultsby, drawing from the work of Thompson and Levine, describes the emergent qualities of black aesthetic expression in terms of a series of conceptual approaches to music-making. Her paradigm foregrounds use of performance, paralinguistic features and other aesthetic signifiers throughout the Diaspora and over time. This adherence to aesthetic rather than formal features of communication allows artists to push generic boundaries while retaining black identity. African American expressive forms do not expire in this paradigm; rather, they retain currency by shifting forms. Cheryl Keyes, an ethnomusicologist who draws from the aesthetic approach to folklore developed by Levine, Maultsby and Thompson to determine the roots of hip-hop, finds that the blues have infused contemporary musical forms in myriad ways. Rather than separate black music into genres bound by place and time, Maultsby finds that music undergoes a constant process of *cultural reversioning*. "the foregrounding (both

²³ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1974) 5.

²⁴ Levine 444-445.

consciously and unconsciously) of African-centered concepts in response to cultural takeovers, ruptures and appropriations.”²⁵

Cultural tourism has taken hold in the Mississippi Delta, where contemporary films including *Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou* and Martin Scorsese’s *The Blues--A Musical Journey* documentary series, as well as a spate of Delta blues cover albums and reissues have sparked international interest in the genre. Fundamental to a healthy relationship between the dominant world and the living blues communities is a willingness of the marketplace to accept the music on its own terms. As the blues continue to unfold, over time and within the context of the communities in which they were created, new meanings and styles are reversioned from the old. A century after its popular discovery by W.C. Handy, the Delta blues remains central to the African American communities of Mississippi. Vibrant, rich, and loaded with the potential for improvisation and transformation, the blues unfolds in private spaces where locals gather. It is dependent on the dynamic of live performance, in which the lines between audience and performer, art and everyday life and tradition and innovation fall away. The blues is a creative celebration of life, replenishing the elements of community and creativity that have sustained the blues people of the Mississippi Delta despite oppressive socioeconomic circumstances. It is not a simply reactive form; a lamentation. Rather, the music of the Mississippi Delta is the site for creativity, strength and transcendence: a positive affirmation of life at the crossroads.

Residents of the Mississippi Delta do not envision their blues as a dark figure alone in cotton field, but feel them in a spirit of shared identity that binds the blues

²⁵ Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1996) 224.

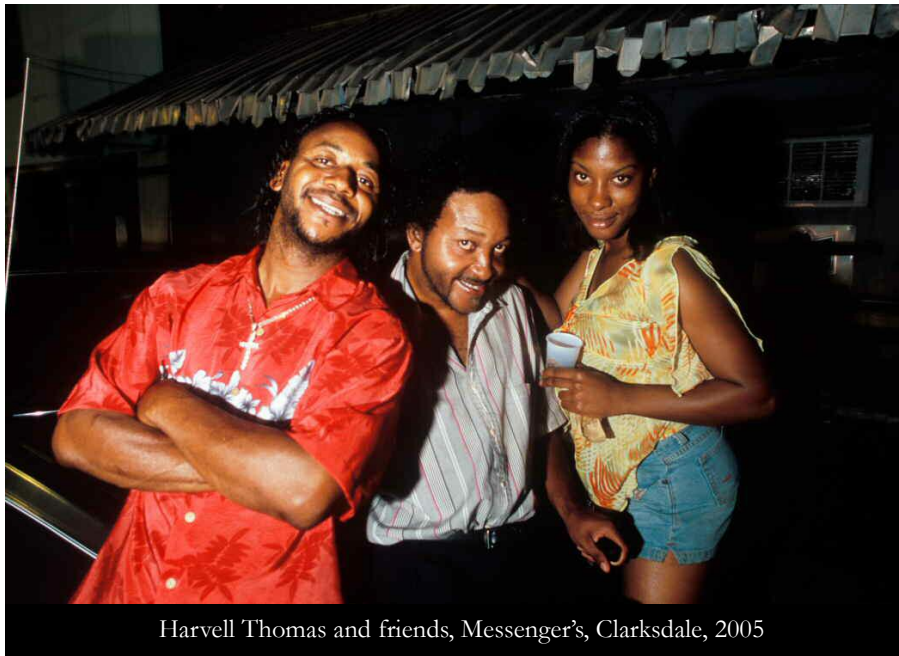
community and sustains its energy as it moves into a new century. In the Mississippi Delta, a site of the nation's most extreme poverty, places like Red's provide space for the expression and renewal of a community's life force. The blues community of the Mississippi Delta constantly creates new modes of communication from the vestiges of the old. In the very act of performing the blues, practitioners sublimate their sadness into a life-affirming, collective creativity. The ultimate product of this oral/musical conjuration is emergent meaning, created at the crossroads of tradition and possibility.

Getting Schooled in the Love Zone

The Love Zone is encased in siding and cobalt blue house paint and situated on the periphery of Sumner, Mississippi. Sumner lays off Highway 49 like a scattered jack, halfway down the Mississippi Delta's dusty spine, half an hour south of Clarksdale. In hot July, this part of the highway is lined with lush green cotton plants, bursting with the thick, wet bolls that make up the fabric of the local economy. Wild veins of swamp and kudzu delineate the edges of the passing plantations; the humidity tinges the atmosphere a heavy yellow to match the tan silt layer atop the rich local soil. Music filters from the dark door of the juke joint. As we drive up in our overheating car, I get the feeling that it might be cool inside. Window unit air conditioners, chained heavily to the outside of the building, grunt in recognition. There is laughter on the other side. I want to be inside more than anything.

I'm an outsider here; I've been an outsider in the Delta all year, inserting my face in spaces that belong to other people: rooms that were not built for me. To the group of elder African American men and FUBU-wearing youngsters gathered before the deep door of the juke joint, I am a potential spoiler, here to self-consciously gawk at their

good times, and they're surprised: not even the savviest of the overbearing blues tourists make it to this hideaway. The woman at the door takes our three dollars apiece and smiles gingerly, pointing us toward the bar in the bright corner of the otherwise shadowy cavern. There, the gorgeous owner and bartender takes our order generously, trading our four dollars for two 22-oz. cans of Bud Light, wrapped kindly in layers of printed paper towels for insulation. We seem okay, maybe just lost and thirsty. She hands us a couple paper plates and tells us to eat. The catfish shines gold, the bowl of greens runs deep. The beer is wet and foamy and perfect.



Harvell Thomas and friends, Messenger's, Clarksdale, 2005

It's stretched-out Sunday in the Delta, a time for hours to last even longer than usual, and the blues start as soon as church gets out and last long into the night. After lunch, the music begins to kick in. A revolving group of musicians emerge from the crowd, scattered to cool, dark corners painted in words and stars. They assemble, those incredible familiar Delta blues players, part of the handful perpetually touring the local circuit, including Earl the Pearl and Harvell Thomas. Into the fray walks Terry "Big T" Williams, who plugs in and begins to riff immediately. The room becomes electric. Big T

works his small crowd by approaching each lady present, looking her in the eye, and playing real close as she dances around his heft, nearly intertwined with his guitar. His trick is to suddenly pull away and rejoin his band, leaving his woman to dance alone or to find a new partner to work up. Big T's signature is "Catfish Blues," the famous old Delta rhyme:

Well I wish I was a catfish
Swimmin' in!
The deep blue sea
I'd have all!
All you good-lookin' women
Swimmin' after me.
Swimmin' after me.
Ah, swimmin' after me!
Oh, swimmin' after Big T²⁶

The song is played as a chugalong dirge, with a revolving riff that jumps and flails from time to time, like a school of spawning fish. The vibe is utterly sexual and infectious. The way Big T plays the song, it lasts for half an hour, winding and ringing until the entire joint is churning at his command. As the song continues, Big T improvises new melodic phrases that echo previous lines and then change them slightly. A man shouts approval from his barstool and Big T answers with a similar sound. A woman begins to dance by herself in a slow grind, and Big T responds with a winding riff.

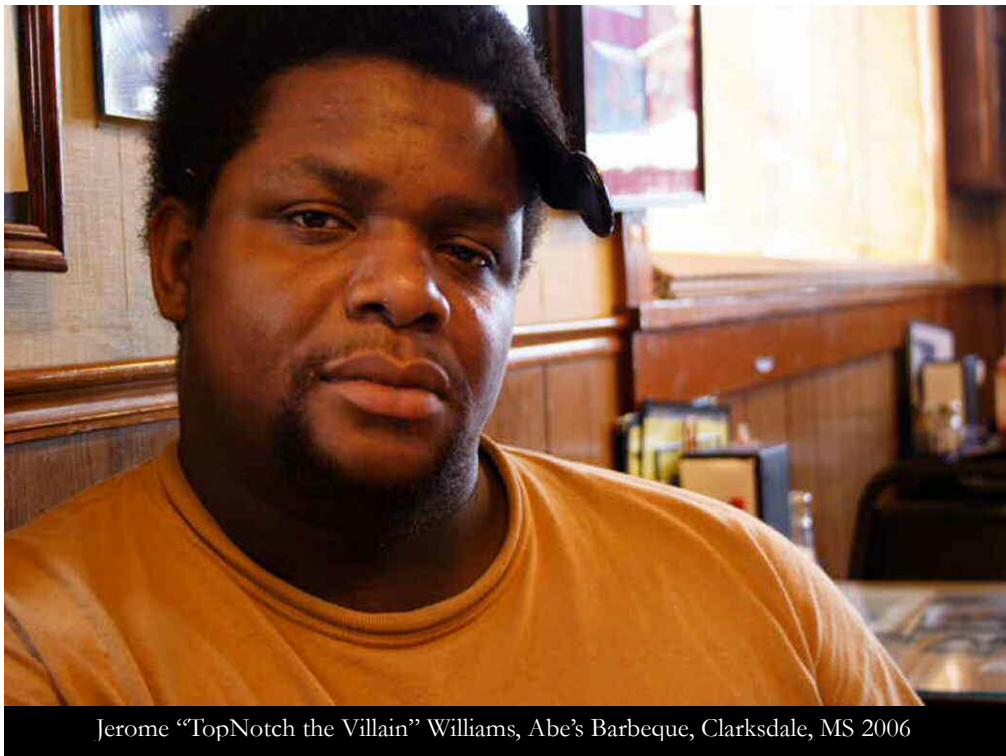
As Big T works his way through the crowd, a young man approaches our table. He's friendly, robust, with an oversized t-shirt and white baseball cap perched atop his thick natural. He's standing with his friend LaMont, a regular at Red's Juke Joint, and

²⁶ These lyrics have been used by myriad blues singers throughout the 20th Century.

tells me that he's heard I'm interested in interviewing Delta rappers. I remember chatting with LaMont a few weeks back about the local music scene.

TopNotch asks me if I'd like to see him rap.

We step outside into the heavy air of the Mississippi night. Giant palmetto bugs and families of mosquitoes fly into our faces as we lean against the posts outside of the club, and curious regulars, many of whom we've met in the club, gather around us. TopNotch closes his eyes for a moment, swallows. He pats his chest, beatboxes behind his hand, and then begins to spit an improvised rhyme similar to many I have recorded since:



Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Abe's Barbeque, Clarksdale, MS 2006

Who's to say my thoughts came from a glass of Kool-Aid
Drunk it up and when I'm sittin' back up in the shade
Summertime for summer rhymes
that I can just spit
For same rhymes the same minds
That make my boys quit

Put that up on your life

And make sure your right time tick
Cause this is TopNotch
And you done heard the lyricist
From a boy
That came from Clarksdale
And made it hard here and
it's hardly felt, thinkin'
that it's hardly the
Air that makes everybody breathe
and then conceive of good feelings
But then again put it back up on your bicycle wheelin's
Took it down from priceless killings
And it's killing your soul

And now I see the cats here
They all out of control
Now let me grab hold of respect
And then put it to paper
But I call collect for fear that
Life is spectacular
Words from the Dracula but don't have them fangs
The only things that I have
Is my pain

So I spit this
From the outside of my heart
To the inside of my lungs
And that the last breath that I spit it
You will hear this song

And every words that I'm copywritin'
they will receive
That it's the knowledge, top dog
From your boy, T.O.P.²⁷

²⁷ Performed as part of an interview, Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, September 3rd, 2005.

CHAPTER TWO: New Blues in the Mississippi Delta

You have Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie and just a variety of music. Even back then, when the blues was real real popular here, every Saturday morning, you know, you would see people outside in the community, barbequin', just drinkin' beer, smokin', and that's how I feel like I got introduced to the blues. Music's been around me all my life, so it's a no-brainer to get in this.

--TopNotch the Villain, Mississippi, 2005¹

I'm gonner make up the next song up all at once and see what I can do. Now it ain't no song. I ain't got no music or nothing to go with it. I'm gonner see what I can do from the root and branch.

--Sonny Boy Watson, Mississippi, 1968²

Four times a week, 26-year-old Jerome Williams spends a 12-hour day at Northwest Regional Medical Center watching electronic blips on a medical computer screen. The hospital is situated on the periphery of the Brickyard, and it is a source of the few dependable jobs in town. TopNotch has been at it for two years, earning training certificates and new skills as he goes. He was photographed for the local newspaper recently for bravely putting out a fire on his floor when an oxygen tank exploded. On regular days, he hovers near the 20-patient EKG monitor for up to twelve hours at a time, its tiny white dots bouncing in sync with the heartbeats of the second-floor patients. It's his job to check their rhythms, making sure that each beat falls right in its own time, strong and even.

When he raps, Jerome goes by the name of TopNotch the Villain, throwing a black baseball cap atop his head and an oversized t-shirt over his bulky frame. He's a freestyle

¹ Interview, Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, September 3rd, 2005.

² William R. Ferris, *Blues from the Delta* (Anchor Press, Garden City, New York 1979) 62.

rapper, inventing verse on the fly, adapting his rhythm and rhyme to his immediate environment. Each of his raps is wildly different from the next, composed expertly in the moment. He sets his beat, strong and even, by patting his chest and sputtering with his mouth, and then begins to spit:

Local boy,
Stayin' poster boy
All about the grain
Never worried about some change
Unless I'm a get some a change

Made my chance
Did my thing
Like I did my homework
But it wasn't from the school
But it was from Delta streets I worked

Everything could end my life
And disrespect be put in dirt
Did my hand and shake my hand

Shake my hand
and give the Lord
All the blessing all the praise
But it was my hand they raise

When they saw the title one
Knowing that the title son
Giving me the whole city
Giving me the lock down
Really just to shock you
If you thought about it top down

TopNotch
Hold the bill
Hold the grain
Hold the steel
Hold the mayo
Hold your meal
Hold the flow
Hold your feels

This is back
Through some years
Through some time

Measure points
Making sure
Everybody feelin' they relate to joints
Pulled the cross
Did some thought
Did some thinking
Did some training
Did forever
'Then came to bubble out you cranium
Still you're drainin' em
With some long type of loop
Everything the Delta said

'They had to be fluid, but the
Difference between smart and the
Difference between stupid
It's a fine line and everybody had to go through it
Believe this
When the people come to the hood they receive this
And make sure that nothin' ends your life
but what's prestigious
Achieving it
'Thinking that all the thing's the same

Make hood for the love but
Love brings pain
But it's overjoy
Speakin' from the choirboy himself
And I know that there was time
when everybody needed help

Look at wealth
Wealth brought us back to a broke situation
Everybody thought they couldn't have it
'Thought they couldn't make it
And there's some feelings from inside
I know I had to take it

It came about pacin'
'Then my heart started racin'
It came about the teacher
and then it ran it away
And then it took another place
And thought it was to stay

I have been getting to know TopNotch through a combination of social gatherings and more formal interviews. This weekend, he has asked me to clear my schedule for a few days so that he can surprise me with a custom-made tour. He wants to show me where his music comes from. I hop into TopNotch's car behind The Filling Station on Highway 49 for our second interview. It's just before nine p.m.; a cold day for a Delta October, and the dark streets are abandoned. It's not easy to describe the way it feels to drive real slow down these old streets late at night: like suspension in an outer space made of tin, concrete and fine brown soil. This convenience store, Top tells me, is where he was almost shot on two different occasions as a clerk a few years ago. His cousin, he continues, was killed by gunfire in a neighboring town in 2001, accidentally



A turn from Highway 49, just south of Clarksdale, 2005

shot while pushing a young woman out of the line of fire. In the years since the interview, I have witnessed TopNotch mourn his cousin's death in many freestyle raps.

We ride past TopNotch's first childhood home, a modest box in the Clarksdale subdivision of Lyon, Mississippi. It was here that he first learned to rhyme, adapting his own message to the rhythms of LL Cool J's "I'm Bad" at the age of five. His mother, Jeweline Williams, was a poet herself and encouraged Jerome to perform for his family

and friends any chance she saw. Economic circumstances forced the family to move to a two-room blue house on the overgrown edges of the tiny Delta town of Crowder, Mississippi. Here, he joined the choir at First Oak Grove Missionary Baptist Church where Miss Martha Raybon, his choir director, encouraged him to improvise new lyrics while performing. Although Jerome's pastor criticized him for "jookin' in the church," the congregation responded with shouts and dancing when the teen led the choir with new lyrics, composed on the spot.

After school, he banded with friends and played the dozens, honing his rhyming skills.¹ The most eloquent battle participant was awarded with the respect of his schoolmates and the inevitability of further challenges. TopNotch excelled at the dozens and soon developed verbal battle skills beyond the rhymed couplets featured in the game. Later in the evening, we sit at a kitchen table with his cousin, Drew Williams, to hear stories of TopNotch's early verbal talent:

It had came to the point that [TopNotch] would stand outside, they be sittin' there, after class or whatever, talkin' or whatever. And he'd get to rappin' against somebody else, and...he'd start from the month, start with January and go all the way to December. Our eyes would be like [widens his eyes]. And he would just go straight through. This man just put a year out on somebody. Just talk about a year against this dude: "January you ain't this. February, you ain't gonna *be* this. March, you shouldn't have gone against me." And he would just go. Man, he just talked about a whole year. I'd hate to see him five years from now.²

Amidst a series of job losses and health crises, TopNotch's family fell into a kind of poverty that was extreme even by Delta standards. Seventeen members of TopNotch's extended family spent many years piled in a tiny Clarksdale project

¹ William Ferris recorded scores of the Dozens in Lyon, Mississippi in the late 1960s, many of which are familiar to TopNotch today. Available through the UNC-Chapel Hill Southern Folklife Collection.

² Interview, Drew Williams, Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams' cousin, Lambert, Mississippi, October 8th, 2005.

apartment, dividing the income from a single disability check between the entire group. Another of TopNotch's cousins, Taurus Metcalf, remembers going to sleep each night with a headache from malnutrition; they could not afford any meals after school lunch.

He was rappin' inspirational stuff. "Get your head up, keep pushin'," things of that nature He used to always rap that when we was little. "Keep your head up, cousin, keep pushin'." So. I still can remember that, so...even when I'm married and got kids, even though things happened to me, I'm "keep your head up, keep pushin'," you know, it was just inspirational. It moves you. Keep your blood flowin'.³

Just as TopNotch was encouraged to rhyme by members of his community, he teaches young people in his neighborhood how to flow. Friends and neighbors often approach him to give them a few pointers or to join them in a verbal contest like the following rhymed conversation with his 11-year-old neighbor, Kevon Jurden.

Kevon Jurden: Now I be in my Grandma's house
thinkin' 'bout good things
and I be up in the kitchen tryin' to cook me some pork and beans
I'm a rhyme
Listen if you don't like it you can go look from behind
And I'm a make my cash and you can look from the past
Like a blast from the past I'm gonna last.

TopNotch: And outlast the criminals
and outlast the snakes
keep your hearts in the real
and just don't deal with the fake
Grass for the lawn, baby,
Ain't gotta deal with the snakes
Just do whatever it takes just to make no mistakes.
Set 'em free.

Kevon Jurden: I'm a set 'em free and let 'em know what I came for
And if you don't like it you can go in the house door...⁴

³ Interview with Taurus Metcalf, cousin to Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, July 6th, 2006.

⁴ From an impromptu performance recorded by the author on July 6th, 2006.

The art and aesthetics that shape TopNotch's verbal style are the result of many years of talking lessons in the churchhouse, at home, in the schoolyard and over the radio waves. TopNotch's freestyle is unmistakably developed, the product of sheer talent, relentless practice and innovation. He's an expert craftsman, able to turn the written word into pure rhythm:

I have put a little pause in [my rhyming style], like when start your paragraph, you indent the first line. From lookin' at a paragraph, that's where I got the pattern from, from looking at a paragraph. That's where I developed that style from, believe it or not, honest to God⁵.

No one ever would have thought that I would have used that particular style...When I implement it, they're like "Oh-ho!" They get their head moving, and I know that I got 'em and that it's a style people like, so I just stay with it.⁶

TopNotch's use of intertextual reference to deepen the poetic/rhythmic conversation sets his style apart and earns him the approval of his peers. He regularly employs aesthetic thought in shaping a rhyme or a rhythmic pattern, sampling from a world of local and popular song lyrics, sounds and ideas to conjure new meanings and levels of conversation. The result is the amazement and respect of his peers, elevating TopNotch to a place in the alternative power structure that is local black leadership. In the Delta, where black life is steeped in the Afrocentric aesthetic of orality, the ability to create conversation between folk forms and popular culture is held at a premium.

TopNotch earned his position of leadership through a lifetime of practice, performance and competition. Every time he elicits a positive response from his crew, every time he rises to the performative challenge, he earns the power to change his

⁵ Interview, Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, October 9th 2005.

⁶ *Ibid.*

community for the better. That leadership means the world to him: after all, he's on a mission.

I just want to let the people hear what real rap is. It's not about what you're claiming or where you're from, it's just where you want your music to go. If it can reach and inspire a heart, then you know you did yourself a good favor just by puttin' a place in your heart for the person that listens to it. Who knows that a rape victim might need another voice to be heard to let them know life can be okay, even if it's something just tragic like that. If someone's feeling down, kids and things pickin' on them, that voice can be their big brother, you know. That's another reason why my talent belongs here, you know, it should be known out here. Personally, I would love, push come to shove, you know, hopefully you all can see me one day out here.⁷

In his freestyles, TopNotch offers art as an antidote to poverty demonstrating, using the word, the power speech has had in his own life. He is both eloquent and frank, freely discussing his demons while discussing his determination to overcome, to transform.

As a teen, Jerome, looking for a way out, joined the military and settled in Fort Rucker, Alabama. The endeavor ended in a crippling back injury for Jerome, as well as a sudden military discharge. Just after his dismissal, Jerome stumbled upon a block party near the base, where he hopped on stage to compete in a freestyle rap contest. He promptly and decisively won, eliciting a huge response from the crowd. It was his first public performance, and it was the answer to his prayers. Upon the announcement of his victory, he was asked his name by the MC, and chose "TopNotch the Villain;" a tag that, he claims, just rolled off his tongue. Like the bluesmen, TopNotch the Villain adopted a "performance name," choosing his own identity as an alternative to the one on his birth certificate—one recognized by the dominant culture. Tricia Rose found that "taking on

⁷ Interview with Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi September 3rd, 2005.

new names and identities offers ‘prestige form below’ in the face of limited access to legitimate forms of status attainment”⁸ for hip-hop artists. The practice of self-naming is a ritual within Afrodiasporic communities, a testimony to the power of the word.

Freestyle and Make-Ups

The most defining feature of the rap style used by TopNotch and his peer group is its dependence on an improvisatory technique called *freestyle* in hip-hop circles, a process TopNotch describes thusly: “That’s a whole lot of words come from my head and make it try to make sense.”⁹ Freestyle refers to rhymes that are invented in the moment rather than written down prior to performance. The element of improvisation creates a performative dimension that allows the artist to prove quickness of wit, mastery of wordcraft and ability to rhyme “on the fly.” Improvisatory technique also allows for the incorporation of commentary concerning the performer’s immediate environment, company and events. Keyes, in her 2002 contextual study of popular hip-hop, states:

Following African American traditional poetic forms (i.e. the blues and toasts), the couplet rhyme, according to Doug E. Fresh, “Is just a condensed way of saying something” (Doug E. Fresh interview). Effective rhyming in rap, as with most poetic forms, requires selecting words for both sound and sense.¹⁰

Delta freestyle hip-hop artists hold the ability to improvise at a premium. While coastal and commercial hip-hop artists tend to work from the written page, Clarksdale rappers rely primarily on oral technique. These artists highlight their improvisatory skills by consistently referring to the immediate environment, such as the following reference

⁸Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 1994) 36.

⁹ Ibid. 36.

¹⁰ Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana 2002) 126.

by TopNotch to this University of North Carolina researcher, which occurred in the midst of a rhyme on another topic:

And that color might be red
but I keep it Tarheel
My boys, dogs grinnin'
Just to show my ad-lib''

When a particularly witty reference to the situation at hand is used within an established rhyme pattern by a rapper, his associates react with verbal approbation, rewarding his skill with an approving yelp or a shouted, "alright, now!" Ultimately, it is quickness of wit within the rap form that determines the winner of a verbal contest, the winner gathering the most vociferous reaction of his peers and, eventually, a leadership role within his clique.

In *Blues from the Delta*, William Ferris found the element of improvisation central to the Delta blues style. The blues singers with whom he worked called their improvised verses "make ups."¹² Blues compositions are rarely recorded in the Mississippi Delta, but instead played at house parties from night to night, often to the same crowd. Thus, the bluesmen need to create fresh compositions consistently to meet the demands of a regular audience. Both Delta blues and hip-hop practitioners use improvisation to demonstrate a facility with words and an ability to maintain a dynamic repertoire.

Although freestyle hip-hop is improvised by definition, artists draw from a deep well of favorite vamps, popular phrases, poetry, song lyrics and oral folklore such as toasts or the dozens in creating pieces. TopNotch, for instance, has a number of his own stock phrases that he inserts into his freestyle pieces such as the following:

¹¹ Interview, Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, October 9th 2005.

¹² Ferris 63.

So I spit this
From the outside of my heart
To the inside of my lungs
And that the last breath that I spit it
You will hear this song¹³

Because TopNotch performs regularly in a number of varied situations (rather than the static context of the popular recording industry) he is free to borrow such verses from himself at will without sacrificing originality. Each of his rhymes is unique, and he can rap ad infinitum using combinations of these and improvised verse. TopNotch is also likely to quote popular hip-hop artists such as Young Jeezy, refer to church hymns and prayers, or incorporate blues or soul lyrics fragments into a piece. This technique is called “sampling,” a concept defined by hip-hop theorist Tricia Rose as “a process of cultural literacy and intertextual reference.”¹⁴ By sampling, Delta hip-hop artists demonstrate their worldliness while simultaneously grounding their work in the familiar regional culture.

This sampling technique recalls the “floating verse” of the blues, in which singers craft song from a mixed bag of communal lyrics and improvised verse. Like the hip-hop artist’s sample, these verses are picked up from other lyricists, folk rhymes and proverbs, sermons and popular song. Delta blues lyrics are used in multiple songs by many singers, pieced together in the moment of performance to suit a particular theme or crowd. The more floating verses a singer knows or can improvise, the longer he can keep dancers moving, and, in turn, the more paid work and community respect he earns.

¹³ Interview with Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi September 3rd, 2005.

¹⁴ Rose 89.

Another prominent feature of freestyle hip-hop in the Mississippi Delta is the element of interpersonal challenge. When TopNotch and his friends encounter others who would like to engage in a verbal battle, a back-and-forth lyrical trade ensues until one competitor falters. These contests take place wherever young people of color gather, between friends and rivals. TopNotch is challenged more often than most because of his status as a freestyle champion in his community. In *Blues from the Delta*, Ferris reports a similar encounter between Delta bluesmen James “Son” Thomas and Joe Cooper in which witty floating verses are alternated between the two before an audience. When Cooper eventually fails to recall or invent a sufficiently witty verse in his turn, Thomas, a seasoned bluesman, follows with four verses of his own, winning the vocal approval of the crowd.¹⁵

The concept of competition and challenge runs deeply through African American folk culture, functioning as a method for the artist to gain respect within his community. In describing a function of the antebellum African American slave dance, Roger Abrahams describes the process by which a dancer was declared captain of his group. The contest would proceed ‘until at last one of the contestants gave up and was hailed ‘the best man.’”¹⁶ The reward for the owner of this distinction was the deference and admiration of the community. In the same way, the master-of-words gains status in his or her community by demonstrating a facility with *nommo*, or the “life-giving power of the word,” upon which Afrodiasporic life is structured.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ferris 67-70.

¹⁶ Roger D. Abrahams, *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African American Culture in the Plantation South*. (Pantheon, New York, 1992) 96.

¹⁷ Asante 83.

Both the Delta blues and hip-hop, when performed before (and in collaboration with) a group, also serve to entertain both the featured performer and others present. In his seminal exploration of the social context of blues music, Albert Murray describes the recreational functions of the blues:

Blues musicians play music not only in the theatrical sense that actors play or stage a performance, but also in the general sense of playing for recreation, as when participating in games of skill...Sometimes they also improvise and in the process they elaborate, extend and refine. But what they do in all instances involves the technical skill, talent, and eventually the taste that adds up to artifice. And of course such is the overall nature of play, which is often a form of reenactment to begin with, that sometimes it amounts to ritual.¹⁸

According to Murray, a cultural journalist from a small black community in Alabama, the bluesman is a creative force given not only the role of the commentator, but also that of the entertainer. To Murray, whose aim was to recast the blues as a active rather than a reactive expressive form, the blues is a music of leisure and dance, tailored more to the Saturday night fish fry than the stereotypical sharecropper's shack.

The prime time for Delta hip-hop artists is also Saturday evening, a time of the week generally dedicated to meeting with friends and having a good time, or (as TopNotch would say) "cuttin' up." Before the clubs open, groups of friends gather, dress up for the big night out, and rap. When a member of TopNotch's crew is performing, the others clap, dance, sing along and chime in, approving loudly of well-conceived rhymes and laughing at less successful attempts. An element of entertainment exists for all present, including the performer, who infuses the night with her style and finesse.

¹⁸ Murray 87.

In the performance of Delta hip-hop, rappers find a venue for presentation of the individual identity as exemplified by their practice of self-naming and use of that “rap name” as a motif.

All the ills,
All the chills
And all the pains from all the years

I can put that like in all the fears
I know you done heard it from
The rap right here
T.O.P TopNotch the Vill
I love the Vill but
love the Top
Put it on T.O.P and make sure
That the whole block know about TopNotch¹⁹

Just as Muddy Waters spelled out the boundlessness of his manhood in *Mannish Boy*, hip-hop artists across the Diaspora use their art to assert their identities. Rose found that “taking on new names and identities offers ‘prestige form below’ in the face of limited access to legitimate forms of status attainment.”²⁰ The lack of black access to political and economic power has long been a defining feature of the oppressive social climate of the Mississippi Delta, lending currency to the need for this type of alternative power structure. The performative function of personal expression exists for the bluesman as well, according to folklorist Mimi Carr Melnick: “His boasts provide him with an outlet for his aggressions and frustrations, lend him a means for expressions of protest, and are generally designed to help him be somebody with the greatest possible

¹⁹ Interview with Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi September 3rd, 2005.

²⁰ Rose 86.

style and color.”²¹ Freestyle hip-hop creates a safe social space for cultural and political expression by young people of color within a stifling Delta social environment. In the words of James C. Scott, “Oral traditions, due simply to their means of transmission, offer a kind of seclusion, control, and even anonymity that make them ideal vehicles for cultural resistance.”²²

Poetic Elements of Delta Hip-Hop

Above all else, Delta rappers use the poetic element of rhyme to frame their work. For these artists, rhyme is the structure around which ideas are built, functioning both as a point of challenge and of organization. Folklorist Cheryl Keyes, in her 2002 contextual study of popular hip-hop, states:

Following African American traditional poetic forms (i.e. the blues and toasts), the couplet rhyme, according to Doug E. Fresh, “Is just a condensed way of saying something” (Doug E. Fresh interview). Effective rhyming in rap, as with most poetic forms, requires selecting words for both sound and sense.²³

Rhyme provides a criterion for judging the degree to which a particular rapper controls language through lyricism and flow. The rapper who can rhyme with finesse (and, in the case of freestyle rappers, on the fly) is considered a master-of-words by his community. Rhyme functions not only as an aesthetic tool, but also as a point of reference with which to judge the talent of a performer. TopNotch has been called the “King of Rap” in his hometown for his ability to transcend the couplet form and weave

²¹ In Dundes 268.

²² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. (Yale, New Haven, 1990) 161.

²³ Keyes 126.

his broad vocabulary into a complex rhyme scheme, as demonstrated by the following freestyle selection:

This is back
Through some years
Through some time
Measure points
Making sure
Everybody feelin' they relate to joints
Pulled the cross
Did some thought
Did some thinking
Did some training
Did forever
Then came
to bubble out you cranium
Still you're drainin' em²⁴

As children, the Delta rappers learned to rhyme from a competitive oral game called the dozens, in which participants insulted each other's mothers with scathing couplets. The competitive aim of the dozens was twofold: to more effectively insult an opponent's family while proving the greater facility with language, judged by the competitor's ability to improvise in rhyme. The dozens also serve to sharpen the oral skills of its practitioners. The longstanding Delta dozens tradition influenced the bluesmen as well, providing a training ground for their memorization and production of rhymed couplets. The same explicit couplets recorded in the Clarksdale subdivision of Lyon, Mississippi by Ferris in the 1960s are familiar to TopNotch and other young people in the area today. Many young rappers in the Delta cite childhood dozens competitions as a training ground for the rap "battle." Alan Dundes finds that the Afrodiasporic practice of dozens

²⁴ Interview with Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi September 3rd, 2005.

serves as an initiation ritual and an assertion of masculinity.²⁵ It follows that elements of this form of competitive folk poetry, which reigns in the Delta, should find expression in both the blues and the hip-hop forms.

Many of TopNotch's freestyles fall within a particular verse pattern. TopNotch's freestyle, when transcribed, shows a consistent structure throughout. The level of development of this structure demonstrates TopNotch's poetic sensibility and ability to tailor his speech to a given pattern. When asked about the composition of this piece in a subsequent conversation, TopNotch claimed to have kept the pattern subconsciously. In other pieces, as in the following selection, TopNotch diverges from a metric/rhythmic motif to create emphasis (here by adding an extra rhyming line), and then falls back into his pattern:

But they behave
They sit in the shade
Drink Kool-Aid when it's summertime
And everybody wants to get some of mine
But I'm not like givin' up some of mine
It's some of the time and you can talk
To everybody can make you walk²⁶

The Delta blues tends to fall within a particular pattern as well, often loosely based on a 12-bar AAB rhyme scheme. The first and second lines in this scheme tend to be identical, while the third offers an insightful and/or witty resolution, as in the following excerpt from Lightnin' Hopkins' *Never Miss your Water*:

Never miss your water till your well run dry
Never miss your water till your well run dry
You know you never miss your little woman until she says goodbye

²⁵ Dundes 297.

²⁶ Interview with Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi September 3rd, 2005.

And like their hip-hop descendants, the bluesmen and women used improvisation and innovation to transcend rigidity and expand upon and emphasize thematic motifs. The most successful blues singers modified the AAB format and the couplet to create unique rhythmic interpretations and rhyme schemes, as in this Hopkins sample from *Smokes Like Lightnin'*:

Whoa, it smokes like lightnin', yeah but shines like gold
Don't you hear me talking pretty baby,
Smokes like lightnin', yeah but shines like gold
Yeah you know I see my little fair one
Lying there on a cooling board

Here, Hopkins uses the rhythmic space within the poetic lines to comment in antiphony to his own statement and creates a dramatic build, responding to the ominous call of his own lyrics in the heat of the moment. For both the bluesman and the hip-hop artist, then, formal poetic line structures come alive with dramatic improvisation. This characteristic marks a number of regional folk forms in this area, from folk preaching to the epic, rhymed badman toasts.

A final formal feature connecting these two regional folk genres is the accented dénouement. The blues players end a song with a stylized musical riff, like a winding down, signaling dancers to wrap up their footwork without stopping the action abruptly. Although partnered dance accompaniment is not a typical function of Delta hip-hop, rappers tend to signal the end of a rhyme or a rhyming turn with a topical riff that serves a correlating purpose: aesthetic resolution. Where a blues player would play a signature antiphonal change from the IV chord to the I, TopNotch closes with a play on his name:

So I spit this
From the outside of my heart
To the inside of my lungs
And that the last breath that I spit it
You will hear this song

And every words that I'm copywritin'
they will receive
That it's the knowledge, top dog
From your boy, T.O.P.²⁷

Musical Elements of Delta Hip-Hop

When battling on street corners or other informal environments, TopNotch and his friends tend to perform *a capella*. Unlike their counterparts in urban centers, who tend to team with a deejay or a custom backup CD, Delta-based rappers rarely use instrumental accompaniment. As a part of everyday performance. Instead, they set their own rhythm internally or using an oral “beat box” technique, creating drum sounds using their mouths. Once the beat is set at the beginning of a piece, rappers proceed to punctuate that rhythm verbally, using the voice as a percussive instrument. The rapper thus creates a self-contained call-and-response, or antiphony, which gives the performance depth and complexity. Early Delta blues artists, when not performing with a backup rhythm section, were also masters of self-accompaniment, using the instrument and/or vocal effects. Seminal Delta blues artists such as Robert Johnson and Charley Patton became famous for their exceptional ability to use their guitar bodies and bass strings as percussive instruments, single-handedly supplying the antiphony that characterizes Afrodiasporic music. Clarksdale singer Son House often sang *a capella*, using his voice to mimic a rolling bass drum on the offbeats.

In addition to broader elements of meter, the musical element of rhythm merits attention as an important element of Delta hip-hop. Various rhythmic structures and

²⁷ Interview with Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi September 3rd, 2005.

tempos are employed by Delta hip-hop artists; often within the space of a single piece.

Rhythm is used to create variation and emphasis, as exemplified here:

Made my chance
Did my thing
Like I did my homework
But it wasn't from the school
But it was from Delta streets I worked

Everything could end my life
And disrespect be put in dirt
Did my hand and shake my hand

Shake my hand
and give the Lord
All the blessing all the praise
But it was my hand they raise²⁸

Here, TopNotch doubles his tempo for one stanza for dramatic effect. Similarly, the self-accompanying pre-war Delta bluesmen were known to alter their rhythms within a piece to create emphasis. Here, Robert Johnson uses rhythmic variation with comic results:

Hot tamales and they're red hot, yes she got 'em for sale
Hot tamales and they're red hot, yes she got 'em for sale
I got a girl, say she long and tall
She sleeps in the kitchen with her feet in the hall
Hot tamales and they're red hot, yes she got 'em for sale²⁹

A third musical element in African American cultural production in the Delta is that of talk-melody. Both blues singers and hip-hop artists, like virtually every citizen in the Delta, have strong roots in the Protestant church, where preachers employ a kind of tonal, or melodic speech. Keyes describes this stylistic link between preaching, the blues and hip-hop thusly:

²⁸ Interview with Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi September 3rd, 2005.

²⁹ Robert Johnson, "They're Red Hot" on *The Complete Recordings* (Sony, B000002757, 1990).

...the preacher's most proven stylistic feature is the use of musical tone and chant in teaching (Jackson 1981: 213). Blues singers talk-sing their melodies as well. Thus, it is not surprising that hip-hop MCs describe their verbal performances as "a melody in itself [or] ...like talking" (Melle Mel interview).³⁰

Hence, the oral "talking" style of Delta rappers represents a form of melody substantially unremoved for the blues tradition. Although Delta freestyle artists tend to deliver their verse a capella, they conceive of their pieces as songs, and their cultural production as a kind of music. In this way, the rappers follow the tendency of Afrodiasporic cultures to blur genre boundaries into an unlimited palate of cultural expression.

Murray describes the musical composition of the blues as a series of vamps, verses, choruses, riffs, fills, call-and-response sequences and breaks that correlate to elements of poetic arrangement.³¹ Although hip-hop artists rarely sing large portions of their rhymes, they use the musical devices of rhythm and vocal inflection to indicate similar movements within a piece. TopNotch, who employs these techniques in his rap, calls this process "changing the grain." He does this by adding polyrhythms to his delivery, using a stylized second voice, or by stepping back and allowing another participant to sing a chorus.

It is likely that TopNotch gleaned these musical tools as a result of his exposure to the blues form as a youngster. According to Murray, the folk blues form lends itself to change and re-interpretation through synthesis, extension and refinement.³² Certainly, the Delta hip-hop artists discussed in this study demonstrate each element of this

³⁰ Interview with Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi September 3rd, 2005.

³¹ Murray 224.

³² Murray 214.

dynamic quality in their work: in the synthesis of the folk blues with contemporary popular hip-hop, in the extension of the blues idiom to apply to contemporary attitudes and situations within the black community, and in the refinement of the rhythmic and poetic aspects of the blues to suit the highly developed hip-hop form. Instead of a break with the blues, then, Mississippi Delta hip-hop style reflects a contemporary expression of its folk-musical roots.

Dynamic Culture in the Mississippi Delta

Couched in strong regional culture and bound by heavily stylized folk traditions, the folk blues and Delta hip-hop share a vivid palate of cultural expression, as demonstrated by the performative, poetic and musical similarities discussed here. The defining traits of the folk blues, forged at the turn of the 20th Century, have found contemporary expression in the freestyle hip-hop of the Mississippi Delta today, indicating the currency of this African American folk form.

In his study of the African American folk hero, *From Trickster to Badman*, John W. Roberts discusses the ability of Afrodiasporic folk culture to adapt to new situations while maintaining its stylistic integrity. “While culture is dynamic and creative as it adapts to social needs or goals, it is also enduring in that it changes by building upon previous manifestations of itself.”³³ Surely, the blues fit this model, having been re-invented and renewed countless times during the course of the last century.³⁴ Hence, although the

³³ Roberts 11.

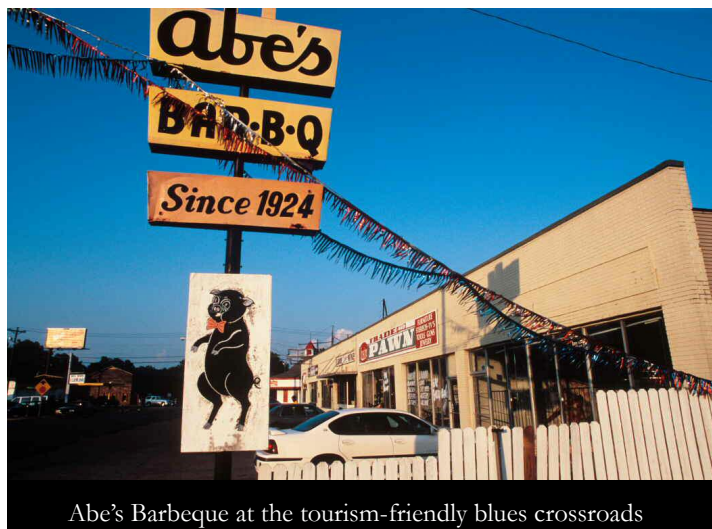
³⁴ Similar studies of the folk roots of Delta hip-hop could be conducted concerning other types of music and orality, including preaching styles, toasts, gospel music and spirituals. Folklorists, including Keyes, have traced the roots of the hip-hop MC to the West African traditions, in which a member of the community acts as a historian, poet, and all-around master-of-words, or *griot*.

preservation of the Delta blues as a cultural form is important, it is also crucial that the critical, academic and popular establishments accept emerging forms of African American music, those created by talented young people of color, as worthy heirs to the blues legacy.

A Blues-Oriented Town

I encountered a group of blues tourists-cum-entrepreneurs today as I bought a soda in the local gardening shop. As “The Delta Blues” continues to gain cache with middle America and blues tourism increases, a number of investment bankers and real estate moguls have been buying chunks of Clarksdale for tourism development. One heavy investor from California has expressed interest in transforming Clarksdale into “the Branson of the blues.” What worries me is that these wealthy people are functioning on and perpetuating ideas of Blues authenticity that do not reflect the Afrocentric identity of the expressive form. This results in a fetishization of the poor, old bluesman in the cotton field and the disenfranchisement of those who fall outside of this romantic definition; namely the young black cultural practitioners, such as TopNotch and his friends, who are the creative lifeblood of the Mississippi Delta.

These investors asked me what I was doing here in town, unaware that I had been living and working here for two and a half years. I



Abe's Barbeque at the tourism-friendly blues crossroads

gave them one of many short answers I have tailored to escape such situations: I am working on a documentary about local hip-hop artists.

“Oh!” said the shaggy white-haired Floridian. “You won’t find any hip-hop here.” His shirt was covered in patches from commercial blues festivals across the South and Midwest.

“That’s right,” said his wife, her swingy ponytail bouncing. “Not one i-ota. This is a blues town.”

“People are blues-oriented in this town,” he reiterated, slightly hurt, almost as if I had slapped him in the face.

Chapter Three: A Family Affair

As we drive to meet TopNotch's friends in a neighborhood called the Brickyard, he takes a moment to explain to me the concept of *hood rich*. It's a term popularized by Big Tymers, an entrepreneurial rap outfit out of New Orleans, in their song "Still Fly." Hood rich refers to the ability of the poorest members of society to make something out of nothing--an old Chevy with a bright paint job, an inexpensive shirt with shiny gold letters, or the use of humor to alleviate the pangs of poverty.

Gator Boots, with the pimped out Gucci suit
Ain't got no job, but I stay sharp
Can't pay my rent, cause all my money's spent
but that's ok, cause I'm still fly
got a quarter tank gas in my new E-class
But that's alright cause I'm gon' ride
got everything in my momma's name
but I'm hood rich¹

The young black community of Clarksdale has renamed its hometown as well: *Clarks Vegas*, invoking the faraway city where luck can change on a dime. In Clarks Vegas, old Chevys get big brass rims and the club gets packed on Saturday night. In Clarks Vegas, new white kicks mean everything and the latest jam blasts. Clarks Vegas is the alternative, a space where the script is flipped. If Clarksdale is a broken old plantation held together with slave-driven nails, named after a slave master, and built for whites on the backs of black sharecroppers, then Clarks Vegas is a beautiful, Afrocentric world, transformed by the word.

¹ Big Tymers, "Hood Rich" on *Hood Rich* (Cash Money, B000065UJJ, 2002).

TopNotch and I cast into the Brickyard, a black Clarksdale neighborhood named after the piles of rubble that line its periphery. It's Saturday night, the time TopNotch and his peers designate for "actin' a fool" and "cuttin' up" with friends. One of his crew, Small Tyme, has invited me into his parent's living room, a Delta jewelbox of red velveteen and brass picture frames, to take video of the crew performing.

The wall-unit space heater is inexplicably turned up to 85 degrees and a group of young women are in the next room, straightening each others' hair, choosing outfits for the club,



Keithan "K-Deezy" Dear on his Brickyard porch

and trying to act oblivious to my intrusion. Small Tyme shows me where to set up my camera and Kimyata Dear, a shy teenage girl in a ribboned football jersey, puts a CD of pop hip-hop instrumental tracks on the stereo.

It's six o'clock as K-Deezy, Young Buggs, Small Tyme and TopNotch begin to mill about the room, improvising rhymes over the top of the prefab beats. My footage of the next three hours is unbelievable. A thin blue beam of light shines down from the glass chandelier, and on a good verbal run, the rappers lean forward to break the beam, their faces obscured by shadow, and then visible again, lit from above. The four young men, flanked by a group of friends, rap about their favorite video games, their babies, violence in the Brickyard and, most importantly, who they are where they're from.

Behind the sounds of the stereo and the words, these hours are punctuated by gunshots, 20 or 30 of them, spread throughout the evening; an unwelcome antiphony to the

celebration inside. They come from close by, not far beyond the front yard, and echo through the streets of the Brickyard that were populated with bikes and kids an hour earlier. The film shows the group of rappers flinching each time a shot is fired, but no one mentions a word. I do my best to ignore them, trusting TopNotch to warn me in the case of danger. When I ask him about the incident later, he offers no explanation but assures me that I am safe with him.

To this group, TopNotch is more than a rapper; he is the Master of Ceremonies. He sets the tone of each piece, lining a thematic riff for the others to follow. As Kimyata flips through the prefab beats with the stereo remote, the guys, who start referring to themselves as the “Clarks Vegas All-Stars” about an hour into the session, collaborate on rhymed sequences organized by theme. The entirety of three hours is improvised, and the crew



DA F.A.M. at the red-carpet premiere of their documentary: Small Tyme, K-Deezy, Yata Dear, TopNotch and Buggs Diego. January, 2007, Clarksdale.

taking turns without a single interruption. Young Buggs, from time to time, sings a chorus as the others chime in. The All-Stars dance in unison, cheering a witty line or an off-the-hook rhyme. All the time, the crew defers to T.O.P., waiting for a slight hand gesture or verbal cue to begin a new rhyme sequence, giving him space to jump in at will and solo for a relatively longer period of time. TopNotch, who has helped to hone the rhyming skills of most of these young people, jumps in when one of his crew runs out of rhyme, like a patient, but persistent, teacher.²

Well, the beat would start, and we would look at each other, and the person who felt the beat would jump in. Buggs was feeling the chorus, so he would pop right on in with it. That's how it went... Everything that you witnessed this weekend, none of it was planned. No one knew that any of this was ever going to go on but me.. I took you through my whole life, and showed you what I do. I showed you the cuttin' up on a Saturday night and the girls shakin' their little apple bottoms...I want you to see all that.

Also, I want you to see how we just goes into a hot house and showed you how we could rap off the top of our domes for two hours straight. The first cut was the only cut. None of this was just directed. None of this was scripted or anything...When the camera started rolling, we started rolling. Who ever would have thought? Real talk.³

With his brand of “real talk” TopNotch is known to many as not only the best freestyle rapper in the area, but an accessible and positive person; a role model. Kids from his neighborhood approach him for rap sessions often, in which he critiques and challenges his mentee to improve his or her poetry and flow. Other adult rappers throughout the Delta invite him to trade rhymes as well, leading to friendly verbal battles. This element of challenge and counter-challenge provides rappers an opportunity to improve their skills.

² See Abrahams *Singing* 92.

³ Interview, Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, October 9th 2005.

Tonight, Top takes the stage himself as Yata forwards to one of his favorite instrumental tracks. It's "Ready or Not," a song released by New York group The Fugees in the mid-nineties. As the music begins with a minor mellowtron riff, Top looks to his left and right, steps to the middle of the room, and begins to spit:

Look here, your boy got this one now
You know what I'm sayin'
It's TopNotch
I'd like to thank all y'all for coming out to see me this evening
To see my All-Stars
Yes, sir
Ridin' slow with this one, you know what I'm sayin'
I pledge allegiance not to the flag
But the flag of the human race born in the hearts of the struggle
This is love

The rest of the group steps back as TopNotch assumes a position at the head and center of the group, still at the far end of the living room from where the girls and I are sitting. He looks directly into my camera, a cheap model I borrowed from the school. I've perched it on the arm of a red velvet couch at the far end of the living room. Top rolls forward onto his toes, hands clasped, and looks up from the ground dramatically.

The gunshots have, for the moment, stopped. Within two measures of the song's start, the bass drum kicks in. Rather than wait for the beat to sink in. Top swoops his arm and begins to rap without a moment of hesitation. The words just seem to flow.

'Thuggin' now
feelin' like the block's been movin'
Like I say it's how the
life I was used to

Man it was nothin' but
three streets and two side views
Like it was South View
But I gave it back and hit it on the Bayou

Cannon used to pick us up
Ride us on the trucks

And took us to cotton fields
So we could make a couple bucks

Believe this or not
but when we fill up that rushin'
Wasn't no trees up
but just the sun hittin' and brushin'

Long pants with them long shirts
Hangin' with towels
Wipin' sweat up from my face
And wipin' it from my eyebrows

Lookin' at the cotton
Didn't feel that breeze
But up in the tiny little chapel
We could get that peace

Look-a here, man
I think I was about 13
Just to hit it back
And keep us on that monetary scheme

Ain't gonna worry about dreams
Cause my dreams don't light
But that hustle from that day
Gave me hustle by night

And it's my stripes
I feel like I know that's love
Matter of fact, I give it back,
Super seatback love

Man the people I know then
Is what I don't know now
But I'm glad I stick
with my people sure how

But it's all love
Cause we came back grindin'
There ain't nothin' here
Just a second nick of timin'

But there have been some things
Some things that may be bad
Got a little big
Now my ass is fat

Put a gat up on your block
And make sure it's packed
And I gave 'em TopNotch
And I get TopNotch back

'Cause I didn't want matter-of-fact
Didn't have to flaunt it
Cause if they taught me that
I'm only headin' [intelligible]

Passin' me a bone to myself
Own to myself
Matter of fact stay lonely to myself

A couple of upper cuts
Are makin' me paranoid
I flip the grain and make the change
And show them boys can be boys

It's the heart of the ten
Matter of fact with the heart
With it then. I gave it all up
So I gave my heart to the man

And if I drink then
I drink for my sane
But this is how the way
It's how the life began

It began for the ready or not
Keepin' that up on the high
And if they ready for block
I ain't worried 'bout 'em talkin

But then again they lookin' at me and
They still stalkin'
But then again I got the streets talkin'

Man I'm lookin' at the
Sign there says, "S.T.O.P."
Ain't stoppin' me
Show me on the beat

And you can want it
Matter of fact they keep it on the street
Like I stir up the sympathy
Word from the beat

And that color might be red
but I keep it 'Tarheel
My boys, dogs grinnin'
Just to show my ad-lib

My elbows be ashy
And my shoes at my knees
But that's all right
I still spray a tune out my cheeks

To the O and to the P
Cause the God at first
Never been a Jehova
But I dare seen it over

Cause my witness is business
Hit it up on like a potato
Cause then they callin' me
The captain was a lieutenant

Man they all just salutin'
Came and took what we doin'
Just to show you this title for
The price of the music

This is all been in love
And I been exposed
Just to took it to the camera show
and then I can blow

Hit 'em up on one more time
and show them my ten toes
'Cause I came from the house
of the 904

Apartment--
about 17 or 18 people
One meal just to serve around
And they call that equal

Matter of fact so many sick days
Came like some sick ways
Showin' like the boss
When they caught me by some trick ways

That's alright
'cause it got me key paid
This is why I love it

I love what I made

I know I came from the struggle
Came from the Bottom
So when I came back here
I never will forgot

I then came back
But I didn't hear the need
So I had to show the people
This was up my sleeve

Hit it up one more time
And watch me bleed
Cause they want to see me
process and proceed

Ain't worried 'bout the greed
'cause this is my life
Just like Jeezy said
Man I give up my strife

Ain't worried 'bout the time
The tickin' be tickin'
Ain't worried 'bout them boys
'cause them boys be missin'

See 'em fishin' in the river
Just deliver their thought
just to show you who it is
TopNotch the Boss.
Shyeah!

The music fades out just as he finishes his final verse. The rest of the group cheers him on with whoops and handshakes. TopNotch looks satisfied and excited, brimming with pride; he's shown his skills as a master of words. Later, after I've transcribed this footage back at the University, I ask TopNotch to help explain some of the references he used in this performance. When I hand him the transcription, he looks upon it with surprise. "I didn't know I could flow like that!" he exclaims. He suggests a few corrections but adds that he's unable to decipher a part or two; he may have been using nonsensical sound to keep his rhythm as he prepared for his next lyrical vamp. In this piece, composed in part in the

moment of performance and in part from vestiges of his own previous rhymes, he's embedded his own biography.

'Thuggin' now
feelin' like the block's been movin'
Like I say it's how the
life I was used to

Man it was nothin' but
three streets and two side views
Like it was South View
But I gave it back and hit it on the Bayou

TopNotch's childhood town of Crowder, Mississippi was so small that it only featured a single through street and two side streets, but after a series of devastating financial blows, his family moved to the larger Clarksdale subdivision of Lyon, Mississippi, where he made and maintained a strong web of relationships. As an early teen in Lyon, Top became known for his rapping skills and became involved with the Vice Lords, a popular gang in the Delta affiliated with a powerful Chicago group. The lifestyle might appear thuggish to outsiders, but according to TopNotch the group is overwhelmingly comprised of non-violent members who provide each other with a network of financial support—legal or otherwise. I have met many members of the Vice Lords in my time in the Delta and have had a number of conversations with them about their perceived need for such organizations in the poverty-stricken area. The boundaries of gang affiliation are drawn by both familial and neighborhood ties.

Cannon used to pick us up
Ride us on the trucks
And took us to cotton fields
So we could make a couple bucks

Believe this or not
but when we fill up that rushin'
Wasn't no trees up
but just the sun hittin' and brushin'

Long pants with them long shirts
Hangin' with towels
Wipin' sweat up from my face
And wipin' it from my eyebrows

Lookin' at the cotton
Didn't feel that breeze
But up in the tiny little chapel
We could get that peace

As a teen in Lyon, TopNotch helped his family earn money by working as a cotton chopper with Mrs. Cannon, a neighbor who organized teams of workers for the fields. The youngsters were paid in cash at the end of the day. TopNotch and other male teenagers and adults in the Delta often wear wet towels on their heads and in their pockets in the summer months as a way to keep cool. The style also signifies a brand of country toughness—a commitment to history--prized amongst many young people in the Delta. Similarly, long-sleeved shirts and loose-fitting pants allowed workers to remain cool in the field and stave off the swarms of mosquitoes for which the Delta is famous. Some young Clarksdale men maintain similar clothing styles throughout adulthood; a stylistic signification that echoes the wearing of prison garb by West Coast youth. Although the fields drained Top's energy, he found transcendence in his home church: First Oak Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Crowder.

Look-a here, man
I think I was about 13
Just to hit it back
And keep us on that monetary scheme

Ain't gonna worry about dreams
Cause my dreams don't light
But that hustle from that day
Gave me hustle by night

TopNotch worked the fields in order to keep his family fed. Cotton chopping is a grueling job in which workers use a hoe to cut weeds and stray foliage from the base of the cotton plant. This work is done in mid-summer in the Delta, where temperatures soar up to 105 degrees and humidity is often 100%. Mites, mosquitoes and poison weeds pose a threat to workers' health, as does the layer of thick pesticides that coat the land and water. He often describes his work as "hustling," whether it involves scraping up money for food or rent by working double-time at the hospital or promoting himself as a rap artist. The latter endeavor involves talking local business owners and venues into allowing his group to perform, and he spends a great deal of time and energy publicizing his work via word of mouth. His passion for his work drives him to practice his art constantly, coordinating recording sessions with his group as well as pay-to-participate Delta rap showcases. Because the economic odds are incredibly tough in the Delta, the art of the hustle—that is, hard work (legal or otherwise) and social finesse--offers a route to survival.

But there have been some things
Some things that may be bad
Got a little big
Now my ass is fat

Put a gat up on your block
And make sure it's packed
And I gave 'em TopNotch
And I get TopNotch back

After suffering from a severe injury from a serious backroad car accident in his early twenties, TopNotch has been unable to move quickly. He's suffered serious weight gain since this time, a point of insecurity for him. He dares challengers to step to him in the second stanza, to literally point their guns; he's sure that his identity and craft will rise to the challenge.

It began for the ready or not
Keepin' that up on the high
And if they ready for block
I ain't worried 'bout 'em talkin

But then again they lookin' at me and
'They still stalkin'
But then again I got the streets talkin'

Man I'm lookin' at the
Sign there says, "S.T.O.P."
Ain't stoppin' me
Show me on the beat

TopNotch references "Ready or Not," the original Fugees song that provides his musical backup. The final verse involves the kind of complex linguistic play that characterizes African American speech in the Delta. When Jerome hastily entered—and decisively won – a street-fair freestyle rap contest the weekend of his 2001 dismissal from the Army (due in part from an injury), he was prompted to introduce himself to the crowd. Having no official rap name to speak of, he came up with "TopNotch the Villain" on the spot, a name that both echoes his given name (Williams), reflects the quality of his work, and demands a rhythmic delivery. The "Villain," according to TopNotch, also reflects his identity as a lyrical gangsta, schooled in the art of the verbal hustle. He plays with the rhythm and meaning of his "other name" in a number of different ways: "I'm known as TopNotch the Villain, I'm gonna give you a-sexual a-healin'," "T.-O.-P., TopNotch the Vill," (this one recalls the sound of a Cadillac Coupe) or "put it on the T.-O.-P." His usage in this particular freestyle is especially masterful. "Sign there says, 'S.T.O.P., ain't stoppin' me'" employs the letters and sound of his name to demonstrate his ability to rise to a challenge. He's T.-O.-P., not S.-T.-O.-P.

And that color might be red
but I keep it Tarheel
My boys, dogs grinnin'

Just to show my ad-lib

My elbows be ashy
And my shoes at my knees
But that's all right
I still spray a tune out my cheeks

To the O and to the P
Cause the God at first
Never been a Jehova
But I dare seen it over

Here, TopNotch shows his skill as a freestyle, or improvisatory, artist by referring to my presence (a UNC-Chapel Hill Tarheels fan) as well as his friend's reaction to this reference. He describes himself on one hand in a self-deprecating way (ashy skin, short legs), but calls attention to his performative skill. Faced with the need to create verse in the moment of freestyle, Top chooses to play off of his name, add on a seeming non sequitur and then rhyme his last two verses according to this construction: sound, then concept, then resolution in rhyme. The masterful creative process he shows here is remarkable.

Hit 'em up on one more time
and show them my ten toes
'Cause I came from the house
of the 904

Apartment--
about 17 or 18 people
One meal just to serve around
And they call that equal

Matter of fact so many sick days
Came like the sick ways
Showin' like the boss
When they caught me by some trick ways

That's all right
'cause it got me key paid
This is why I love it
I love what I made

The reference to 904 recalls the small apartment TopNotch lived in for some time in his childhood, in which 17 or 18 members of his extended family survived on a single disability check. Beside school lunch, TopNotch and his cousins were rarely able to find nourishment and often went to bed early, their heads aching. In his later teens, Jerome spent a great deal of time in the home of his best friend, Timothy “Small Tyme” Williams, and his extended family, the Dears (group members Yata Dear and Keithan “K-Deezy” Dear are also family members). The Dear household was a safe haven for Jerome, supported by the income of matron Debbie Dear, who worked as cook on the gambling boats an hour north in Tunica, Mississippi.

Poor management, layoffs and desperate competition have complicated TopNotch’s quest for financial stability. As a result of the soaring unemployment once institutionalized by planters in order to keep labor cheap, job stability is dismal and working are just above welfare levels. TopNotch, a talented student and worker without higher education, has struggled to maintain employment in a society where workers are routinely fired for “insubordination” or “dishonesty” just before they become eligible for benefits, raises or unemployment.

I know I came from the struggle
Came from the bottom
So when I came back here
I never will forgot

I then came back
But I didn’t hear the need
So I had to show the people
This was up my sleeve

Hit it up one more time
And watch me bleed
Cause they want to see me
process and proceed

Ain’t worried ‘bout the greed

‘cause this is my life
Just like Jeezy said
Man I give up my strife

The epic tones of TopNotch’s freestyle reflect his own history of struggle and transcendence. His childhood stretched from one small Delta town to another, confined by the bounds of poverty and freed by the power of community. His choice to end his performance with a demonstration of transcendence frames his performance as one intended for audiences far beyond our group in the Dears’ tiny living room that night.

Ain’t worried ‘bout the time
The tickin’ be tickin’
Ain’t worried ‘bout them boys
‘cause them boys be missin’

See ‘em fishin’ in the river
Just deliver their thought
just to show you who it is
TopNotch the Boss!
Shyeah!

Here, TopNotch calls attention to the artifice of his craft—the music is reaching its final measures, but TopNotch won’t stop casting about for inspired verses until he’s ready to stop. He frames his freestyle with a final assertion of his identity and an exclamation of pride in rising to the performative challenge. He’s satisfied, and the rest of the group pats him on the back, shouts out, and lines up to start in on their next group rhyme session.

For All My Ladies

Although she remains silent during the course of the young men’s freestyle session, I can see that Kimyata Dear knows how to rap—she’s been mouthing her own words while the others spit. I ask her, as the men finish, if she knows how to rhyme. She nods, and TopNotch encourages her to perform a piece for me. She selects a particular musical track with which she is obviously familiar, and steps gingerly to the center of the room. While the

males nod, standing off toward the walls, 17-year-old Kimyata recites a rap she has written about the ravages of drugs on her community. Her chorus, like the verses of her peers, focuses on transcendence: “Open your eyes/Look up to the skies/And you’re wise,” she says, her voice growing stronger with each line. She’s memorized the piece rather than freestyling it, and her poetry is complex and delicate. As she finishes her performance, the guys greet her with shouts and applause, and she steps back into her role as the song selector. She sits down next to me and tells me that she has her own group called Spades Entertainment: three teen girls who sing and rap together. Months later, she will hand me a demo she made herself in her brothers’ bedroom, complete with her own beats and a beautiful vocal track. Her rich singing voice winds its way through the music as she raps:

Yata (in the nasal voice of a bailiff):

All court arise.

We give miss Antoinette life in prison,

Found guilty of murder.

Yata:

I’m a hold it down for my ladies behind bars

For my thug niggaz smoking blunts in the yard

And I’m a hold it down for my hustlas on the streets

And this for my thugs you gets love from me

If wasn’t for the pain and sorrow,

Then life wouldn’t exist and there wouldn’t be a better tomorrow

Yes, I did things and got caught up in the mix

But if it wasn’t for those wrongs then I wouldn’t be doin’ this—hey—

I’m makin’ it happen despite who hate me

And I trust no one but the one who made me

God gave me a gift and you can’t take it away

And every time he awakes me it gets better every day

And to my thugs keep thuggin’ on the block

Stay real don’t drop

Count your bread with the hundreds on the top

To my ladies behind the metal gates

Don’t cry, wipe your eyes, don’t go out that way

All my hustlers take a solo stand
Snitches gotta grip to you like a wristband
But whatever you do
Don't give up keep doin' your thing
Let 'em look, let 'em watch
While your money say ching-ching

TopNotch has been teaching Yata how to rap for over five years, when she first approached him with one of her poems and asked for his advice. He told her she had potential and has been working with her to create complex rhymes and a highly stylized



Kimyata Dear in her bedroom, 2007

vocal delivery. He's especially proud of her work, featuring her on all of the group's recordings.

Yata's poetic skill has been a constant source of pride for her from the moment she

began writing rhymes in junior high school. She learned to write, in part, from her mother Debbie, who has been writing poetry since her own teen years. Yata's talent with verse earned her a number of poetry awards at her school and district. Inspired by TopNotch's rhymes, Yata began to tailor her poetry to hip-hop performance. She had been singing at church and family reunions from childhood and was ready to take it to the next level. TopNotch has coached her into strengthening her delivery and developing a unique style: tough and feminine. She directs her rhymes to a female audience.

At school, both boys and girls respect Yata for her status as a rapper, although she often finds herself proving her skill to the guys. She's a talented student with hopes of attending college one day. Although she knows that job prospects in the Delta are dismal, she says that she'd like to stay in Clarksdale to help lead the community into better circumstances. She also hopes to teach more girls to rap, because, in her words, "some of them can do it better than the guys." Yata prefers to write and memorize her rhymes before she performs them so that she can get them just right. But it only takes her a few minutes to write a whole song, she says, so she combines the quick wit of freestyle with the polish of poetry.

The Black Ski Mask

In 2005, TopNotch and his group began to call themselves DA F.A.M., a name that signifies both their familial bonds with each other and their commitment to and "For All Mississippi." They recorded a few songs in a local studio owned by young middle-class white musicians in the Delta, a business built to profit from blues travelers seeking to brand their recordings "live from Clarksdale, Mississippi." Once local hip-hop artists caught wind of the affordable studio, however, they approached the owner for recording time. The studio downloaded sparse, bassy beats from websites offering non-copyrighted prefab music tracks. In December of 2005, the group saved just over a hundred dollars and made their first demo. The group picked out a track and sat down to write their verses on the spot. The result sounds more like strains of commercial southern "crunk" music than the playful freestyle sessions I had recorded previously.

Small Tyme:
Woooooooooweeeeeeeeee!

Ay, it's the FAM know what I'm talking 'bout! We got a ghetto service to Memphis. These niggaz with the dreads in their hair. All the nigga with the rock face, you know what I'm talking about. Doin' bids. Let's get it!

TopNotch:

Start somethin' finish somethin'. All ready. The chorus like this. Said:

The black ski mask
The black Cadillac
The black ski mask
The black Cadillac
The black ski mask
The black Cadillac

It's murder on this track
It's murder on that track...

Small Tyme:

I'm kinda hungry and my mouth need a thirst
That's why I'm out on the corner everyday first
Got me on the street I'm actin' like I'm savage
Sellin' everything, oh boy I gotta have it
You small change you never did it big
You never joined the ranks you never did bids
You never did that you never had no cheese
That's why your pockets fat
You wanna be like me
You wanna drive a Lex but you're so wack
You never fuckin' make it
And if I see you on the block I gotta take it
So call the cops
I ain't runnin' from the law, so fuck what you saw.

[Chorus]

Young Buggs:

If a nigga got a problem it's time to murda.
If you can't stand the heat then get off my turf. Huh.
We the niggaz that be down to ride,
Down for DA F.A.M. or commit suicide-damn!
We don't claim to be some trill-ass killaz
But the killin' in you will protect your scrilla-huh.
I ain't Nas but I am Illmatic
Loaded guns for the batter cause the streets be tragic
Get up on the street that they really reserve
And their tears real hollow when they hold me on the curb
Let you hataz know that we're comin to get ya
Layin' down these rounds, "yo homey up witcha?"

We stepped up man, without the jackets
Frame it on on the FAM, "hey money, what's happenin?"
We so up in it these hataz can't stand it
We takin' our respects, and our niggaz demand it

[chorus]

Yata Dear:

When Yata stands the ground underneath the black sky
The only light you see is the white in my eye
I'm dressed in all black in my mack with no tinting
And I'm ready to attack
All you suckas get back
Thinkin' that you ready you have no idea
How I make a kick drum far sight disappear
It's magic for the tragedy fall to your knees
Fuck bein' weak I'm one of the rivers in the streets
Y-A-T-A yup that's me
It's a lot to the golden grill and I got the golden key
And when I walk no one walks with me
And when I talk no one talks with me
I'm my own army
So get back cause I done already warned you
Step without thoughts and this girl will harm you

[chorus]

K-Deezy:

I first came out the cuts bumpin' Too Short
Then I lean and rock with it 'til I got hooked
You see I'm young and wild but I don't give a fuck
And anybody else talking tell em what's up
And if you ain't ballin' you gotta shut up
You see I am the grain and then I do my thing
Blacked all out with the magic truck man
It's really magic cause this shit insane
Pull it all out and let it marinate your brain
So keep thinking that we're soft, fuck around
You can get your head knocked off
You dealin' with a real baller
So keep your mouth shut and
Stop talking to the cops
Have you runnin through the hood like moe
This real ass shit
All you fake niggaz can talk
We already got found in the game and you lame niggaz lost

[chorus]

TopNotch:
 Ski mask Cadillac at it you don't want that
 Hungry for an ass-whoopin' get your name on this Army jacket
 Grounded motherfucka already got me stirred up
 Tippy-toe I can fit off the chance it's murda
 Rude on the street with a bad nine ghost end
 On the rise we can ride Cadillac five deep
 All across the Mississippi they don't wanna know about
 Playin' niggaz comin' out hard out the fuckin' South
 Yata right hand choppa
 Left hand choppa choppa
 Small don't give a fuck bout none of y'all up on the block
 Deezy gotta say throw some grass on the fuckin' spot
 Wanna takin' out the trash on the fuckin' nine
 A Buggs I made it a hell baby fix
 Got you already set and now divide up your clique
 Just before you take your last breath here's the last one
 Now introducing me, T-O-P, night here I come.
 [chorus]

In *Black Ski Mask*, Da F.A.M. uses the script of gangsta identity to stake their claim as southern hip-hop artists. Their lyrics about thug life and ghetto posturing echo the strains of the “crack rap” that represents the southern ghetto on BET and MTV. The members of the group, none of whom has marks on his or her legal record, tell me that the lyric “murda on the track” refers to the musical track (or song), and that the violent references work to intimidate lyrical competitors. They mix the language of their own violent experiences in the deep-southern ghetto with the signified language of rap competition, and create a hip-hop identity with many layers of meaning. Many popular southern hip-hop artists who have experience with the violence of poverty but do not themselves behave violently use a similar vocabulary in their work. The group, who hopes to market their records to peers in the Delta as well as the greater public, has no intention of perpetrating black-on-black violence. They do benefit from their use of the gangsta posture in two major ways: an appeal to fans of the crunk and/or gangsta genres (both of which have been phenomenally popular on the

international scene) and the use of a coded rhetoric of opposition. Using a black ski masks that recall the masked saboteurs of African American folktales, and a black Cadillac that rides triumphantly over those who would stand in their way, they ride right up to, in Yata's words, "the golden grill" and unlock it with "the golden key."

The group used this demo to participate in a local pay-to-play hip-hop showcase at the local VFW organized by a group of Memphis rappers. Most of the groups who took part in the showcase used similar references to thug life in their raps. Next to professional-looking rappers with sets of shiny gold teeth and expensive "pimped-out" clothing, the group looked reticent in their matching black t-shirts and minimal dime-store pendants: it was the best they could afford. Each group lip syncs one prerecorded song, and DA F.A.M.'s starts before they're ready. They scramble to catch up and manage to coordinate their dance. Their nervous, friendly faces belie the heaviness of their lyrics. They walk backstage from their first live stage performance triumphantly. They've been performing their entire lives, but the popular stage is an entirely new context for them.

All in DA F.A.M.

Loath to shell out any more money for studio time, group member K-Deezy learned to use a digital recording program and cobble together a studio in one of the tiny bedrooms at the Dear house. After becoming ill with leukemia during middle school, Keithan "K-Deezy" Dear (Small Tyme's younger brother and Yata's elder) endured years of treatments at Memphis' charitable children's hospital. When he was thirteen, Make a Wish Foundation offered him the opportunity to fulfill a dream. Michael Jordan wasn't available to meet him, so he received his second wish instead: his first computer. Deezy programs his own beats using Acid Pro, a PC-friendly music program. Before long, Deezy taped a microphone to the

inside of his closet, adding a filter made of panty-hose and hanger wire, and started to record.

The group gathers as often as possible in Deezy's bedroom, where he shuffles and creates rhythms on an outdated laptop. Once he lays down a thick bass line, the group gathers in a circle and begins to write rhymes—they feel it helps them perform in a more polished way than freestyle. By the time Deezy's added the song's instrumental hooks, the group is ready to record. They take turns behind the mic, reading their lyrics from a sheet stuck to the wall with electrical tape. Deezy uses a technique called “double tracking” to make the vocals sound fuller, in which each rapper records his or her rhyme up to three or four times, each a little different. When the recording software juxtaposes the versions, the effect is stylized and intense. The group tends to work through at least one song a week, from bumpin' club tracks to slower love songs or ghetto tropes. The most important aesthetic thread running through all of the group's production is that of bass, the deep growling sound that characterizes southern hip-hop.

Timothy “Small Tyme” Williams, the eldest sibling in the Dear family, has been rapping since second grade, when he and TopNotch (Jerome at the time) performed a rap during class show-and-tell. Small Tyme puts forth a hard persona in social situations, donning extra-dark shades and an indifferent personality that can be intimidating upon first blush. But he spends his work days administrating the local HeadStart program, where he spends moments between job duties playing rhyming games with pre-school kids. Small Tyme's work with the kids gives him a critical perspective on the need for educational spending and after-school programs in the Delta, and he often raps about the need for opportunities for young people in the region, including his own six-year-old son.

I always speakin' the truth about what we feel and how we feel things are goin' on. Especially with the economics in this town. I mean, we need jobs,

we need...we don't even have a YMCA in this town here, that's why so much crime goes on in this town here. I think a lot of outsiders don't get it. Don't listen to how the music sounds, listen to what we sayin'.⁴

Anthony DeWayne "Young Buggs Diego" Buggs is more a singer than a rapper, adding his rich vocal vamps to DA F.A.M.'s mix. He's a local basketball star who spends his afternoons on the local public court on the border of the brickyard, and he finds inspiration both in the strains of popular hip-hop as well as the church:

When I hear one of K-Deezy's beats, I get the energy of, you know, whether I should sing this or whether I should rap this, you know, but, as far as the spiritual energy goes, um, I feel sort of that same thing. When one of those beats is hot, I get the energy to say, ok, let me see what I can bring to it. Sometimes I get the feeling that I need to sing a hook, or just straight up rap it. But I have a little singing influence in me, and so that comes from the church.⁵

DA F.A.M. pulls together the influences of church singing and preaching, poetry, the dozens, and traditional black oral styles to create their contemporary sound; one that has its roots in tradition but belongs entirely to the group, as practitioners, tradition-bearers and innovators. In their use of traditional forms to speak to personal and contemporary circumstances, the group has found its power.

TopNotch: You know, you can't change the whole place, you know what I'm sayin'. That's almost like sayin' things ludicrous. However, you know, pretty much get the people that's willing to listen, you know. People that just want to have some type of changes in life or whatnot. And then, you know, you work with that. And maybe then you go out and you get the people that you can reach and could be the people they can reach. And you know, it's a transforming experience. It's, you know, a domino effect thataway. So, pretty much, it all starts from that one person just having the drive, have the idea, have the motivation to get something done, but just need just the manpower or the tools or the right essentials just to get that task completed.⁶

⁴ Interview with Timothy "Small Tyme" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, July 15th, 2006.

⁵ Interview with Anthony DeWayne "Buggs Diego" Buggs, Clarksdale, Mississippi, July 15th, 2006.

⁶ Interview with Jerome "TopNotch the Villain", Clarksdale, Mississippi, July 12^h, 2006.

Cuttin' up in Clarks Vegas

After the living room rap session, the group takes me to Annie Bell's, a makeshift hip-hop club housed in some kind of prefab metal garage. The parking lot is filled with older-model cars, many of which are decorated with oversize rims, bright paint jobs and bright hubcaps. Nestled next to the club is a little barbeque stand, where a dozen clubgoers wait for their orders of chicken breast on white bread or tamales. We line up before the



doorman, who seems unsure whether I should be allowed to enter. He nods his head, and we pay our three dollars as he moves aside. As I follow TopNotch into the club, I realize that I am the only white face in the crowd of 300 or so. I buy round of cold beers for the guys and align myself with the wall. Girls dressed in impeccably matched outfits flashing with rhinestones and bright jewelry dance and socialize. A DJ to the left side of the red-lit dance stage selects Dirty South favorites on his laptop and greets newcomers, rapping greetings to arriving regulars

and inciting patrons to dance over the heavy crunk bass. TopNotch stands in the center of the dance floor, dripping with sweat and style and bouncing heavily to the beat, his hat precariously cocked on the edge of his natural. Small Tyme jumps onto the dance floor and begins to work his way across the floor, dark sunglasses adding to his cool swagger. He's the best dancer in the room and neighbor girls from down the street hop up on stage to dance with him. Top, Small Tyme and Buggs line up at the edge of the stage and bounce in unison,

a move they call the Dirty South Sway. Top purses his lips in a mocking face and begins to roll back and forth from his waist with his left pointer fingers on his temple, shaking his head “no.” This move, Top explains to me later, is called, “think about it.” The beats continue, and the whole room takes part in the celebration. It’s Saturday night, time for cuttin’ up, and the palpable sense of celebration extends far beyond the rafters of the big tin garage.

CHAPTER FOUR: True Blues Ain't no New News

Many underclass black people who do not know conventional aesthetic theoretical language are thinking critically about aesthetics. The richness of their thoughts is rarely documented in books...We must not deny the way aesthetics serves as the foundation for emerging visions. It is, for some of us, critical space that inspires and encourages artistic behavior.

--bell hooks¹

About fifteen miles south of the Tennessee/Mississippi border, TV signals fade, most cell phones cease to work, and hopes of socioeconomic equality struggle as if trapped under the thick cotton curtain that lines its boundaries. In this part of the world, the radio auto-tuner swings almost completely around the dial before finding a weak signal to pull from the air. More than likely, it's community radio you're hearing from the closest small town—tiny stations with tiny transmitters whose signals manage to roll over the flat Delta landscape for 20 miles in any direction. From this ether, strong black voices emerge from the midnight: each singular, each exquisite.

The first of these to register on the dial is that of West Helena, Arkansas' KAJK 104.9:

"This is DJ Pimp Min-is-ter here with your Friday night sookie, soookie, soooook-ayyy!"¹

"Hello, Helena. You're listening to party blues and oldies for grown folks only. Be grown or be gone!"

"I'm givin' a shout out tonight to my partner, Leroy White. Let me hear you say, Lee-roy! Lee-roy! Party down, party down!"

¹ bell hooks, *Earning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (South End Press, Boston 1990) 112.

Keep on south, and KAKJ fades out around the Lyon exit, with Clarksdale's WROX phasing into the dial. DJ Lady Cherry is on the microphone, conducting the night with the coy but pointed demeanor of a master blues vocalist.

"Hello, Clarksda-yullll. You're listening to WROX, the home of Southern Soul, and I am your host, Lady Cherr-ay. Cherishhhhhhhhhhh! Cherrycherrishhhhhh! Ain't that somethin'? Ooo-wee!"

Lady Cherry spins a lover's trifecta of songs, including Theodis Ealey's raunchy "Stand up in It," Robert Johnson's bittersweet "Come on in my Kitchen," and, inevitably, Kool and the Gang's "Cherish." The next morning, a new deejay has taken over the WROX airwaves, this one busting through the morning air with the enthusiasm of daybreak.

"This is Hines in the mornin' times at WROX, X, X, the station that Early Wright built. George Hines, Hines, Hines on your radi-yi-yo. NO! There is nothing wrong with your radi-yi-yo. We are simply...jammin'. I'm like the deejays back in the day: systematic, cruisamatic, rip and read!"

Throughout the Delta, rhythmic oral/musical performance

takes place anywhere community gathers. Nowhere does the power of the word ring more clearly than the pews of the Baptist church. In the pulpit of Crowder, Mississippi's Pleasant Grove Missionary Baptist Church, Pastor Allen Johnson delivers his sermon with dramatic expertise:

If you don't get into the word, he already got you beat.
That's why you don't bother with him



George Hines showing an article about Early Wright at WROX

He already got you
He's goin' with somebody else
'That's tryin' to learn the word of God
Why
Because he know that
the word
The word of God is what he's afraid of
He's not afraid of you
'He's afraid of the word of God
He took Jesus
And put him on a pinnacle
And took him to his weakest spot.
He knew he was hungry
And fasted for forty days and forty nights
He knew he was hungry
and tempted him with these things
take time to think about what you're doin'
take time to get it right
Take time
To line up the word of God with your lifestyle
And this is what God wants up to do
To line up the word with our lifestyle
And when we line up the word with our lifestyle
Then God will hear your prayer
and answer your request
He tell us that's what your weakness...

You gotta live and walk in the word.
It doesn't matter
what the drug addicts say.
It doesn't matter
what the pimps say.
You gotta live in the word.
Because the word will.
Keep you.²

At Sherard, Mississippi's Pleasant Grove Missionary Baptist Church, another of the Delta's little white churches, Miss Jacqueline Lenard leads the choir in her own styling of the popular gospel tune:

How you gonna pay your rent
When all of your money's spent?

² Recorded by the author, Crowder, Mississippi, July 16th, 2006.

Say you got a light bill due
And you got a gas bill too!
Jesus will work it out!³



Antonio Coburn, Red's bartender

The power of the word extends into the heart of the Delta's juke joints, where talk is the featured attraction. Antonio Coburn, Red's bartender, is a robust young man with a smiling round face. It's the end of the night and everyone has a full drink, so he sits down at the little table closest to the end of the bar to join me, a visiting UNC student, a young woman from the neighborhood and a young local for a drink. Red and Antonio exchange verbal jibes in their usual uproarious way. Eventually, I ask the pair if they know any of the old toasts. They exchange a glance but don't respond. I tell them I know what the toasts are and take a laughable stab at the first stanza of "Dolemite": a rhyme I learned from a Rudy Ray Moore film years ago. They laugh knowingly. After a little begging and a promise that I won't get offended, the bartender gives in and begins "The Signifyin' Monkey." The three patrons of the bar pull their barstools up to the little table in the corner of the room as he continues his explicit version of the old rhyme about a shit-talking monkey and his victim, the powerful old lion. His performance is exceptional, rolling rhythmically with the repeated refrain, "This made the lion mad." Eventually the patrons begin to repeat these words with him, and he continues after each chorus to describe the lion's unwitting reaction to the monkey's antics. There are no clocks, but the performance seems to last around twenty minutes. The audience is attentive and titillated. Antonio's

³ The Kurt Carr Singers, "Jesus Can Work It out," from *Awesome Wonder* (Gospocentric, B00005TSOV, 2000).

response is to launch into a rendition of a second toast, entitled “Shine and the Titanic,” with matching aplomb.

The Power of the Word

From the church pulpit to the blues radio waves, African American people in the Mississippi Delta create spaces for the performance of verbal art. The traditions of eloquence, to use Abrahams’ term, that define black speech are manifest in every aspect of African American life in the Delta. The power of the word is also at a premium in hotspots of oppression, where residents are disenfranchised from institutional and official routes to power. Heavily stylized speech, often accompanied by music, allows Delta residents to create power from below as well as retain life-affirming creativity. This language crosses the boundaries of genre, region and era as practitioners draw from the past to create live, emergent meaning. In chapter two, I discussed the formal and performative similarities between the Delta blues and contemporary Delta freestyle hip-hop. In this chapter, I will show how oral/musical improvisation holds a special and stylized place in the cultural life of the Delta and is passed from one generation to the next. From preaching to toasting, the traditional verbal styles of the Mississippi Delta have set the stage for the contemporary development of the region’s distinctive hip-hop style.

The deejay, preacher, singer and toast-teller each hold a special status in the black communities of the Mississippi Delta, where Reverend C.L. Franklin, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ike Turner, Pops Staples, B.B. King, Memphis Minnie, and Lil’ John each learned to speak. The traditions that nourished the work of each of these masters-of-words are drawn from a deep well of Diasporic performance styles many scholars and practitioners date to the *griot* of Sub-Saharan Africa. This oral historian and musical performer holds a special tribal status and is enlisted by community members to protest personal trespasses, recite deeply meaningful proverbs, or recall tribal histories.

Often self-accompanied by a stringed instrument or talking drum, the griot performs in a highly rhythmic, deeply signified poetic style. John Roberts, whose work *Trickster to Badman* represents a comprehensive, Afrocentric study of the black heroic tale, finds that the African bardic tradition provides the wellspring of African American verbal art. Roberts traces the history of the black folk hero from the African animal tale to the post-WW II badman. In this documentation of the trickster's symbolic, stylistic and aesthetic continuity, Roberts demonstrates the tendency of Afrodiasporic expressive culture to retain a core aesthetic while allowing for the incorporation of emergent style and meaning. Roberts cites the ethnographic work of Daniel Biebyuck in Zaire, who found that the West African master of words has many similarities to those in the new world:

The bard is not bound by a rigid text that he must follow with precision. ...He inserts personal reflections, proverbs and statements. He digresses to speak about himself, his ancestors, his experiences, clan or caste, his artistry, his musical instruments, his teachers and predecessors, or about certain members of the audience.⁴

The African bard used a combination of tradition and innovation, memorized scripts and improvisation, and the expected and unexpected to elicit a positive response from his audience in the performative moment. In the new world, the tradition of rhythmic spoken-word performance continues in myriad forms. Roger Abrahams cites a plantation owner's description of a master-of-words at an antebellum slave dance, in which a merit-based "captain" conducts the ceremonies:

"Here a position of real importance may be granted the person who finds himself or herself in the center, for each participant is called upon to helping the project of keeping up the spirit...His leadership enables his followers to have an intense life-affirming experience together." The captain was "...usually the most original and amusing, and possessed of the loudest voice," improvising words and music for the celebration.⁵

⁴ Roberts 124.

⁵ Abrahams, *Singing* 105-106

The earliest manifestations of Afrodiasporic oral traditions in the Mississippi Delta included levee camp work songs and field hollers. The grueling work of clearing the rich, swampy Delta of thick cane break and the earth-moving work of levee building that took place in the years just before and during the Civil War era brought huge amounts of black labor to the area. The work was intensive, and men worked with their mules to move earth twenty hours a day. Songs and chants, shaped by an adept song leader in call and response with his group, helped to drive workers throughout the day. Lomax collected a number of such songs from muleskinners in the Delta, including the following example, which may have provided the basis for Son House's "Death Letter Blues."

W. B.:

Well, well, well, well, I got a letter this morning,
That's the way it read:
Hurry home, hurry home,
Your wife and baby is cryin' for meat and bread...

B. G.:

Some call me Slick,
An some call me Shine.
But you can hear my name
Ringin' all up an down the line.⁶

After its clearing and landforming, the loamy Delta soil, nourished by yearly floods of the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers, provided a fertile crescent for the planting of cotton, a crop that requires intensive natural, technological and human resources. The need for careful planting, chopping (or weeding), picking and ginning of the cotton demanded massive amounts of black labor, and blacks came to vastly outnumber whites at the plantation sites. Delta planters, who sought to control their workers through coercion, disenfranchisement, and strict social taboos, established a set of carefully-calculated social institutions. One method planters used to retain control involved

⁶ Lomax 244.

the implementation of institutionalized lack through debt peonage, a system that kept workers poor and indebted to planters for the most basic of needs. Under this system, black workers could not afford to pay their debts and were bound to their work sites under threats of violence. The specifics of cotton planting gave rise to series of important social facts that would shape cultural space in the Delta. First, extreme measures were taken by slaveholders (and, later, plantation bosses) to control the social lives of black workers. This involved measures to regulate forbidding free expression on the part of blacks. Many musical instruments were banned, church meetings were restricted and few conversations took place without fear of espionage. Racist taboos and the threat of lynching emasculated potentially resistant black men and marginalized black women. Planters retained control by distributing resources including food, clothing, hygienic products, and education minimally.

A second social fact that resulted from the specifics of the Delta cotton industry was the existence of large numbers of African American workers living together on the peripheries of huge cotton plantations. In Coahoma County, large tracts of black housing cropped up in the black ghetto of New Africa, as well as the edges of the Sherard, Farrell, Lula, Stovall, Hopson, Bobo, Flowers, and King and Anderson plantations. In the shotgun shacks populated by African American fieldworkers in post-bellum years, the black community gathered to hear African-derived folktales about animal tricksters such as the brer rabbit or signifying monkey, who use verbal alacrity to get themselves out of tough situations with stronger animals. These stories not only entertained listeners; they also reinforced the community values of performance, Afrocentricity and the use of wordcraft to obtain power from below. Tales emphasized the need to keep information away from hostile ears, to mask true motivations behind innocent ones, and to use verbal wit to extricate oneself from tricky situations. The trickster tales developed into stories about Massa and Old John the slave, who was often caught stealing food or other resources on the plantation. John, unpredictable and oppositional, represented the human embodiment of the animal trickster. Folk

legend John Henry also appeared in antebellum years, a steel-driving railroad man who used his heavily symbolic “nine-pound hammer.” to achieve incredible feats of labor.

In the reconstruction era, African Americans began to build tiny white plantation churches for Sunday worship. Missionary and Pentecostal Baptist church services foregrounded the powers of music and the spoken word throughout their all-day services. Like Reverend Johnson, whose impassioned sermon is transcribed at the head of this chapter, Baptist preachers use the elements of rhythms, improvisation, song, gesture, call-and-response, and the insertion of memorized verse into improvisatory performance to create a vigorous church atmosphere. In my experiences in a number of small black Baptist services in the contemporary Delta, I have witnessed preachers use animal trickster tales, folk proverbs, jokes, spiritual song, theatre and poetry to reach a congregation. The three-hour-and-up church services in the Delta involve a revolving lineup of preachers, choirs, incanting deacons, soloists and testifiers, all of whom use the power of the word to inspire and uplift the congregation. Although the male pastor is the most visible master-of-words in the plantation church, women participate in every aspect of the Sunday service as preachers, choir directors, soloists and instrumentalists.

The plantation also became the site of the country juke house, where workers gathered at night to restore their energy through community fish fries, drink and group celebration. These spaces encouraged constant verbal creativity on the part of participants. Blues lyrics and bawdy toasts, the featured performative styles of the juke joint, each drew from the trickster tradition. Traveling Delta blues men Tommy Johnson, Robert Johnson, Willie Brown, Muddy Waters, Henry “Son” Simms and others played in the plantation commissaries and Jewish and Chinese storefronts in Sherard, Stovall and Friar’s Point. The Silas Green Minstrel Show involved local black singers and comedy performers and enjoyed a lengthy run near the Farrell Plantation. The master of words was present in all aspects of the recreational life of the plantation; a realm of positivity and rejuvenation

that served to relieve sharecroppers from the rigors of cotton field labor and the brutality of plantation owners.

Perhaps the most important social fact shaped by Coahoma County's cotton trade was the foundation of the town at the ancient Native American crossroads as well as the waterway of the Sunflower River, a direct tributary to the Mississippi River. These transportation routes provided the development of Clarksdale as a capital of cotton brokerage. In antebellum years, the crossing of blues Highways 49 and 61, situated in the center of Clarksdale's New World District, became a destination for traveling laborers, mostly male, who sought to follow piecemeal wage labor after the Reconstruction. In the Jim Crow South, these temporary workers needed access to food and lodging, and this black cultural center arose just south of the Illinois Line train tracks. The blues players who had gotten their chops on the plantations translated their work to the cosmopolitan city center. A growing and vibrant black community furnished national black musical acts with a ready fan base. Clarksdale became an important stop on the chitlin' circuit, and black musicians found a ready audience in the laid-over travelers, migrating workers, and hustlers who populated the New World District. The Dipsie Doodle, Roxy and Savoy Theatres, Red Top Lounge, and the street corners near the crossroads provided venues for prewar blues artists. Women blues singers Memphis Minnie (who was, in fact, from the small Delta town of Walls) and Bessie Smith appeared often in Clarksdale.

From the traditions of verbal art such as the trickster tales, boasts and proverbs as well as the new blues aesthetic developed blues talk. The Delta's best toast-tellers gathered round the dominoes tables and dice games of Messenger's game room on old Highway 49, just down the block from the crossroads, to tell tall tales of bad motherfuckers from Railroad Bill to Dolemite. In slow, stylized, menacing rhyme, the toasters recited extended folk poems, both memorized and tailored to the crowd at hand.

The blues continued to change with time, and the use of electric instruments in the larger clubs downtown, as well as the chugging aesthetic of the moving train, contributed to the creation of a seminal R'n'B sound. Ike Turner and Jackie Brenston, B. B. King, Bobby Bland and Muddy Waters all contributed to new musical styles that, although tailored to the hopefulness of a new, more cosmopolitan generation, were deeply connected to the region's cultural roots. Bigger bands could gather in the central nightclubs of the New World District with a drum kit and piano to boot. Many of the songs remained the same as they had been for half a century, but they sounded fresh with the addition of bigger, louder instrumentation. New songs used the Delta aesthetics of rhythm, call-and-response and double-innuendo to speak to a new generation. Clarksdalian Jackie Brenston sung out hopes for social mobility in his "Rocket 88", considered by many to be the first rock'n'roll song. Artists such as the Jelly Roll Kings and the Mississippi Sheiks drew from Delta minstrelsy and national musical trends including swing, boogie-woogie, classic jazz and urban R'n'B.

In the mid-twentieth century, radio rose to importance as a social space for African American expressive culture. Black radio was introduced to the Delta as an advertising venue in the 1930s. Food, clothing and agricultural supply companies have invested in radio as a means to attract the African American customers who comprised two-thirds or more of the local population. In order to keep black listeners tuned in, stations began to hire musicians and deejays from the local community to act as commentators, record selectors, live musicians and all-around emcees. These deejays were known to introduce a record and then respond to its verses over the airwaves in a call-and-response between the static world of recorded music and the engaged live audience. The deejay who could accomplish this talk in rhyme was highly regarded. William Ferris captured this radio deejay style in his 1975 film *Give My Poor Heart Ease*, in which Jackson deejay Joe "Poppa Rock" Louis interacts with a favorite B. B. King record by manipulating its playback:

Joe "Poppa Rock" Louis: [Into mic] The man say, "Why I sing the blues is because I lived it." [Intersperses speech with snippets of BB King record]

I know how it feels, [Music]
When you're hurt. [M]
Someone must understand, [M]
How you feel. [M]
The only way to do it is to say it loud and clear. [M]
Make sure that everyone will hear. [M]
It's the truth the way it is. [M]
That's why I sing the blues. [M]
This is B. B. King, [M]
Making a statement. [M]
And a natural fact. [M]
All you got to do is sit back, [M]
And dig where it's coming from, [M]
Listen, [M]
Not only with your ear, but also with your heart. [M]
Everybody want to know, [M]
Why I sing the blues.⁷

One of the Delta's most successful early shows was KFFA Helena's "King Biscuit Time". Hosted by renowned mouth harp player Sonny Boy Williamson (along with guitarist Robert Lockwood, Jr. and pianist Pinetop Perkins), King Biscuit broke boundaries by allowing blacks to express themselves musically, in the public realm, with the approbation of white advertisers—and eager listeners. In 1947, the first African American deejay in the South was hired: WROX Clarksdale's Early Wright, who managed the station from 1947 to 1992. Wright was a master of rhyme, rhythm and rap whose quick wit made him the toast of Delta society—white and black. He was best known for his commercial breaks, in which he used the advertising format to promote himself as well as the product in question. "Just tell 'em Early Wright sent ya. They have a full-figured dry goods store specializing in large sizes, with stockings up to size 200. Wow! Under the same roof is Miss Louise's Typing Service. She can do letterheads, obituaries, funeral directories, and term papers. She's a wonderful person. Go tell her you heard about her on the radio." As the self-described "Soul Man," Wright used dialect and poetic license to create a rhythmic flow of words

⁷ Ferris, *Give my Poor Heart Ease*, 1975.

and ideas. By employing alliteration, assonance, rhyme and pastiche, Wright created an influential style of radio announcing while referencing a number of established cultural phenomena. He also employed dramatic techniques such as breathiness, volume dynamics, control of speed and syncopation and an occasional burst into song. And while he treated white listeners to a lesson in style, Mr. Early Wright also sent a stylized message of pride and endurance to his community.

In an oppressive, segregated cultural atmosphere, Wright used his position and style to create African American agency in powerful ways. Wright would often promise a free dozen eggs or cut of meat for the first listener to visit an advertiser's business without the permission of the white business owner. When a handful of people showed up at the store, the owner would dismiss the promotion as a trick on Wright's part while enjoying a boost in business, all the while shaking his head. He also used a variety of poetic technique to garnish his style. "It's the right time of nighttime, Early Wright time... Pleasant good evening, ladies and gentlemen, how do you do? This is the Soul Man, to be with you, until I get through. So stand by and don't have no fear because the Soul Man is here." Although whites are quick to speculate that Wright was illiterate--and therefore couldn't read the drab advertising copy he so wonderfully paraphrased--he used his style and talent to leverage a position of power and pride for himself in one of the most clenching Jim Crow societies of the South. Wright was responsible for teaching Ike Turner to deejay at WROX, and influenced radio greats Rufus Thomas and B.B. King, who, in turn, continue to influence global musical styles.

The advent of the automated cotton picker and use of herbicide to kill weeds in the cotton field brought widespread unemployment in the Delta in the 1950s. Clarksdale's declining planter aristocracy, themselves moving to the comfortable cosmopolitan cities of Oxford or Memphis, no longer had use for the labor surplus they had created. They burned huge tracts of sharecropper housing on the plantations so blacks could not live rent-free. Many purchased rows of dilapidated shacks downtown to rent at an inflated price to their former workers. The black population who

chose to remain in the South rather than take their chances in the equally poverty-stricken inner city moved closer to the town centers, but when the train eventually ceased to operate and the crossroads fell into disrepair, the city could no longer support its people. The old blues Highways of 49 and 61 fell into disrepair, and new bypasses were built outside of town. The Civil Rights Era ushered in a new era of violence and oppression for black residents of the Delta, and the 1979 school desegregation resulted only in the building of white private academies. The streets of the New World district are empty, but the Delta's bright churches and warm juke joints remain, as do the regional radio stations, music and language. The music in the Delta today might sound different from those in the prewar years, but carries on a distinct set of regional aesthetics under new generations of practitioners.

Signifyin' Rap in the Mississippi Delta

The verbal styles that characterize contemporary hip-hop—urban or otherwise—have been essentially nourished by Afrocentric performance in the agrarian South. Each of the styles transcribed here—blues talk, preaching styles, gospel singing, and storytelling in rhyme have been prevalent in the Delta in some form since the arrival of black labor in its swampy camps. Nowhere are the raw materials of hip-hop more firmly rooted than in the Mississippi Delta, where oral traditions provide a vital link to history, emergence and community. Although illiteracy rates are among the highest in the nation, black residents of the Delta retain rich skills of oral communication—skills learned outside of the classroom and within the warm context of common culture. Even in a society predicated on the institutionalized lack, residents of the Delta retain an extraordinary richness of language.

The use of *rapping*, or rhythmic and musical speech, is essential to black performance styles throughout the African Diaspora. Blues talk, preaching styles, children's rhyming games and

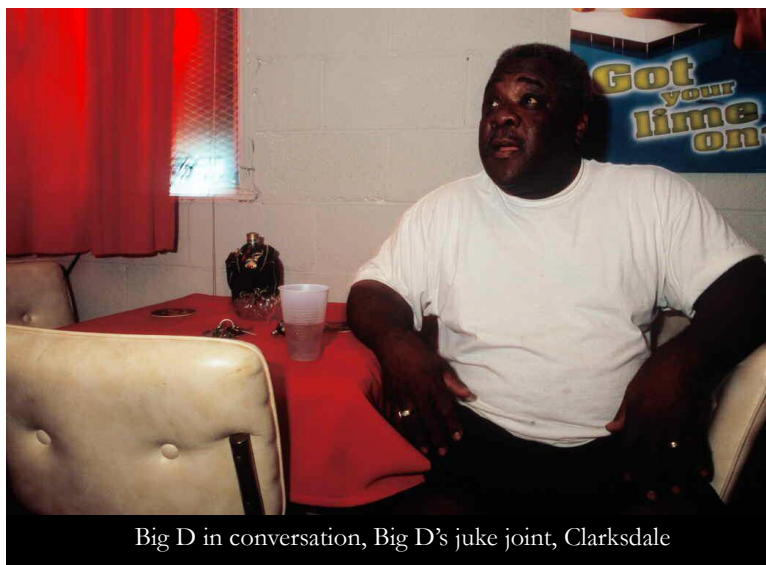
storytelling are especially prevalent forms of rap in the American South, where messages of survival, opposition and celebration have traditionally been coded in genres acceptable to white ears. In this sense, *signifying*, or the use of one set of verbal meanings to obscure deeper ones becomes especially important to verbal artists. Signifying through multilayered speech has been especially useful in the Mississippi Delta, where the slightest hint of oppositional meaning was often brutally punished by white overseers. Necessary to this practice is the ability to code-switch, a simultaneous use of two languages W.E.B. DuBois termed *double consciousness*. The ability to speak simultaneously in the languages of the in- and out-group was crucial to the craft of black masters-of-words in the Delta.

Signifying manifests itself in slang, from the use of the term “grain” to describe the status quo (as in cutting a piece of wood along its natural grain, or “going against the grain”—that is, rebelling) to more complex terms such as “hustlin’”. Hustlin’ can mean stealing, and is often interpreted this way by dominant listeners, but in fact refers to any number of actions that allow the social actor to transcend the bounds of caste using wit, inside information and/or hard work. To dominant society, hustling means theft; to residents of the ghetto, hustlin’ indicates an individual’s drive to break free of oppression. In the case of the Delta blues, discourses of resistance were hidden beneath the language of defeat, pathos or silliness. A paralinguistic cue such as gesture, tone or facial expression often signals those in the know that a double meaning is being used. In other circumstances, group understandings are strong enough that signifying can be done with no detectable giveaways. Or some audience members are able to interpret the deeper meaning while others, due to the speaker’s calculations, remain unaware. According to Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, who found that signifying functions as the primary site for meaning-making in African American

verbal culture, the term “refers to a way of encoding messages or meaning which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection.”⁸

Indirection uses words to work around meaning. This might involve circumlocution: the bluesman might ask his woman to “squeeze his lemon.” Or a performer might make up an entire story about a mean old snake that has an uncanny—but unstated—resemblance to a plantation boss. When Muddy Waters, the revered Delta-cum-Chicago bluesman, declared himself a “mannish boy” in his famous 1955 recording, he was ostensibly directing comments about his sexual accomplishments to a female audience. But in the context of the institutional emasculation that was part and parcel of black masculine life in the Delta, one can imagine Waters also admonishing a plantation boss to stop calling him “boy.”

The elements of signifying and indirection, among many others, provide a rich site for the display of verbal creativity, a privileged form of expression in the Delta. Rather than arrange preformed linguistic blocks on the literal level, verbal practitioners use the interplay between text and subtext to create multiple possible interpretations. Both signifying and indirection form the basis



Big D in conversation, Big D's juke joint, Clarksdale

of a highly rhythmic speech, thick with meaning, that has been called *rap* in the Delta for close to a century. Radio announcers rap between songs, members of the community engage in “rap sessions”, or deep conversations, and those needing information ask another to “rap at

⁸ Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, “Signifyong” in *Dundes* 311.

your boy here.” Rap signifies meaningful conversation in myriad contexts.

From the earliest field hollers to the hip-hop “hollaback”, the element of call-and-response, of accountability to audience, is critical to a successful performance. A master-of words uses the tools of tradition, improvisation, signification and indirection to craft a complex and multilayered performance. He or she knows this by the reaction of the audience. Just as the rhetoric of the badman provided prewar verbal practitioners with a safe space for discourse, hip-hop provides a site for the expression and transcendence of hardship and the celebration of identity and community. The symbolic world of contemporary Delta rap, populated with grinning thugs, Prada-wearing fly girls, ski masks, Cadillacs, and glistening nightclubs, closely resembles that of the prewar bluesman, and thereby renews the importance of signification in the expression of ideas that “go against the grain” of historical oppression.

Ain’t I a Blueswoman?

In his ethnography of the expressive culture of the Delta, Lomax dismissed the role of women in emergent public performance:

[The blues] was no life for a woman; it was too risky; it took you away from your steady man and your children...These are not distractions that women are simply not interested in for very long.

But other factors entered in. Few Delta women sang or composed the blues precisely because they did not live the blues in the sense that their men did. Feminine lives were rock-hard and filled with sorrow, but they did not face alone the danger, deprivation and orphaning of Delta life in as direct a fashion every live-long day as the men....The lives of women as mama’s helpers, wives, mistresses, mothers, domestic workers, and churchgoers sheltered and protected them from much of the brutalizing interracial experience their men knew....It was the men, not the women, who created a song style meant to keep a team of mules surging in the collar from dawn to dark.⁹

⁹ Lomax 361-362.

The prevalence of white male ethnographers in the world of black speech and music has contributed to the popular perception that women are only marginally involved in the world of oral/musical improvisation (and, for that matter, racial oppression). Lomax's conclusions, based on those of Dollard, Cohn, Johnson and other early Delta ethnographers, offer but a surface reading of both the lives of women in the Delta and their expressive culture. The extraction of women from the cultural context of musical development in the Delta (beyond the music of the church) is a mistake made by scores of blues ethnographers. What is particularly surprising in Lomax's depiction is his reduction of the roots of the blues to the work song rather than highlighting its stronger connections to a number of genres practiced equally by women, including spirituals, children's games and folk proverbs. To be sure, blues practitioners in the Delta formed their styles in a certain fullness of context that Lomax may not have recognized in the course of his two brief visits to the Delta. The stuff of the blues is much more than the need to eek out labor from oneself. It is the expression of community values, history and hope. Secondly, the assumption that bluesmen were "interested in" leaving their partners and children behind shows the ethnographer's interpretive conflation of social structure and culture.

Folkloristic songcatchers have, for the most part, associated popular crossover genres such as the blues and rap with the work of male practitioners in masculine-centered performance spaces, women are essential practitioners and tradition-bearers of both sacred and secular song production in the Delta. Invested ethnographers including John W. Work and William Ferris found evidence that speaks to the importance of the blues in the lives of women, their participation as audience members and performers, and their experiences with the selfsame oppressive institutions that, in part, inspired the men to practice the transformative power of music.

John W. Work, the Fisk University researcher who collected folklore in the Delta in 1941 and 1942, found women and girls participating in a number of oral/musical rhyming styles in Coahoma County. He found girls leading co-ed groups of children in game song:

Instead of the lyrical prettiness of....typical Anglo-American game songs..., most of these songs these Delta children sing are characterized by vigorous rhapsody. In these there is a rapid, highly rhythmic alteration of parts between the leader and the group—true examples of “Call and Responses” chant form. The singing style is ejaculatory and such melody as there is, is usually in measure-long fragments. The group usually responds with a polysyllabic word or short phrase. Thus, these songs represent the definite survival of African musical elements.¹⁰

Work located Mrs. Bessie Stackhouse, a resident of Clarksdale’s New Africa (a sharecropper’s ghetto), who was a living repository of dozens of such rhyming songs. She encouraged the many neighborhood children under her care to develop their own personal twists on these game songs, which sounded very much like the blues popular at the time. Sang young Florence Stamps in leading the playgroup:

It takes a rockin’ chair to rock
Satisfied
It takes a soft ball to roll
It takes a song like this
To satisfy my soul.¹¹

The “satisfied” line is actually sung by the group of children as a refrain in response to each line of the leader’s song. Annie Williams provided her own version based on the first leader’s motif:

I ain’t never been
Satisfied
I ain’t never been
Went down here
To the new ground field
Rattlesnake bit me

¹⁰ In Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov, *Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University-Library of Congress Coahoma County study, 1941-1942 / John W. Work, Lewis Wade Jones, Samuel C. Adams, Jr.*. Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 2005) 99.

¹¹ Ibid.. 104

On my heel
That didn't make me
That didn't make me
Mamma can't make me
Papa can't make me.¹²

Not only did women and girls know the vocabulary of the blues, they were also able to improvise their own songs around blues motifs. From a very young age, girls and boys played rhyming games together, incorporating bits of sacred and secular song, popular slang and gendered challenge and counter-challenge in their performances. Kimyata Dear reports that she often rapped against boys in the schoolyard, but that she was held to a higher standard of performance than the males. This inspired her, she said, to rise to the occasion. She knew she had the flow to compete: her mother and schoolteachers had been teaching her to shape her skills of poetry and performance since childhood. She learned to sing in church and at family reunions and played hand-clapping rhyming games in the schoolyard. Most importantly, she was guided by her own passion for her craft to seek out CDs by popular lady rappers including Gangsta Boo and Lil' Kim. Kyra Gaunt, in her seminal study of black girls' rhyming games including double-dutch game songs, finds that girls, in childhood, use rhythmic musical rhyme and improvisation to learn black language patterns. Gaunt concludes that it is only through years of negative reinforcement on the part of males and dominant norms that adult women appear to become ambivalent toward their own participation in popular music.¹³

In the Delta, women and girls participate in virtually every genre of musical speech performance, although they do tend to practice some (like leading the gospel choir or bawling the blues) more frequently or publicly than others (such as poetry or preaching). Barbara Looney, a

¹² Ibid. 104

¹³ Gaunt, in Mark Anthony Neal and Murray Foreman *"That's the Joint," The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (Routledge, New York, 2004) 251.

blues singer from Greenville, is the favorite blues performer in the Delta, commanding a band of men including guitar impresario Mickey Rodgers. Southern Soul, a polished contemporary take on classic blues themes preferred by “grown folks” in the Delta, offers a stage for scores of popular female singers. Denise LaSalle of Belzoni and Vickie Baker of Vicksburg are especially popular. Mavis Staples and Koko Taylor, both of whom have roots in the Delta, are favorites on the contemporary airwaves of WROX. Aretha Franklin’s father Reverend C. L. Franklin was a Delta preacher on Dockery Plantation before his migration to Detroit. Taylor is known to employ the blues boast throughout her performances:

I'm going down yonder, behind the sun
I'm gonna do something for you, that ain't never been done
I'm gonna hold back the lightning, with the palm of my hand
Shake hands with the devil, make him crawl in the sand

I'm a woman, oh yeah
I'm a woman,
I'm a ball of fire
I'm a woman,
I can make love to a crocodile
I'm a woman,
I'm a love maker
I'm a woman,
you know I'm an earth shaker
OH oh oh oh
I'm a woman¹⁴

Emerging young female blues artists such as teen Venessia Young have graduated from Clarksdale’s Delta Blues Education Project, a state-funded program that pairs local blues elders (Big T and Mr. Johnnie Billington among them) with young students for the purpose of teaching them traditional methods of blues performance. A number of young female rappers also populate the world of hip-hop in the Delta, stealing the spotlight at local rap showcases. “Lady T”, a Clarksdale rapper and co-ed dozens champ, tells me that she raps over the mic at the local lesbian-friendly hip-

¹⁴ Koko Taylor, “I’m a Woman” on *Deluxe Edition* (Alligator Records, B00005UF1W, 2002).

hop club, where she is highly respected by men and women alike. Even in the seemingly masculine setting of the juke joint, women's participation is central to musical performance. Ferris, in his study of a Delta house party, found that the vocal "blues talk" of female audience members' figures largely into the evening's tenor. In Ferris' description of a Clarksdale blues house party, a woman named Juicy Fruit uses her verbal skill to creatively egg the performer on, choose his repertoire and inspire him to improvise verse. This is certainly not the domestic wallflower we see portrayed in Lomax's ethnography.

Women's voices are especially prominent over the waves of local blues radio. Lady Cherry, a popular rapping DeeJay at WROX, received mentorship from an established Clarksdale deejay named Lady Chocolate. In 1992, a "quiet" woman named Linda Johnson asked DJ Lady Chocolate to lend a few records for her first attempt at deejaying. Lady Cherry goes on to explain how she got her name, which served as her official entrée to the world of deejaying. "She was the first deejay that I knowed in Clarksdale. I went to her for music, and she said, 'You need a name.' She is dark, and I'm light-skinned, so she called me Lady Cherry." Lady Cherry has grounds her style the past while representing her own personal traits. Although Cherry listened to Early Wright and the other Delta deejays growing up, she credits her style to a less Earthly source. "I asked the Lord to guide me and direct me. I didn't try to imitate. That's the soul truth."¹⁵

Not only do women practice oral/musical improvisation, they also contribute to the expressive culture of the Delta as tradition bearers. Mothers, teachers, choir directors and sisters each have a role in the passing down of performance styles. If we focus solely on masculine influences on Delta hip-hop, we overlook many of the important functions of the music: functions

¹⁵ Interview, Lady Cherry, (Linda Johnson), WROX DeeJay, September 18th, 2005.

that are community—not phallicly—centered. It is important to examine Delta freestyle hip-hop in the full context of communal performance rather than the songcatcher’s limited stethoscope.

Moms and Second Moms

TopNotch hasn’t told me where we are going as we drive slow through the unpaved back roads of the Mississippi Delta. Half an hour east of Clarksdale, we roll into Lambert, Mississippi, a tiny Delta town situated a stone’s throw from Marks. We park and walk up to a beige, vinyl-sided trailer on a small lot. TopNotch introduces me to his mother, Jeweline Williams, as she opens her front door and invites us inside. Her house is well-lit and cozy, furnished with matching chairs and a collection of stuffed animals and family memorabilia. The walls are lined with family photos.

TopNotch: This God-given talent, may be the case or what have you, your parents just wanna show you off—“Oh, he looks so cute, Oh, he’s so cute. Won’t you do this for me, baby?” And you didn’t really want to do it, you know what I’m sayin’, but you can’t tell you mamma “no” or she gonna whoop you or something, you know what I’m sayin’.

Jeweline Williams: He could say all the commercials at a certain age. I remember he just be up in there doin’ somethin’ and he put it together and then he start sayin’ his ABCs backward.

TopNotch: Pretty much they say I had a good memory.

Jeweline Williams: Just like, he didn’t know how to read and go in there, sit on the commode and put the book up like this here, bottom side up, I swear he readin’. And I’m like, come in there and ask him what in the world he doin’, he’d say, “I’m readin’.” Ask him what in the world it was: “Oh, I’m through now.” He’d close the book and get down all nice and beautiful!

Mrs. Williams has placed TopNotch’s first-place trophy—the one he won the weekend of his release from the Army—on a well-lit end table of the living room. She’s proud of his skill as a rapper—all of her children are talented artists, poets and performers and although she declines to take any credit, she acknowledges that she’s encouraged them to be their best.

Later, about half an hour east of Clarksdale, we stop at a brilliant blue hut, not much bigger than a one-car garage, with its windows and door missing. Impenetrable, wild Delta brush, the kind that inevitably hides snakes and chiggers, had grown through its floor and covered its patch of front yard. TopNotch tells me that this was his second home, and I wonder how such a tiny room could hold an entire family. I think about the way TopNotch negotiates his own history of poverty in his rhymes.

They had to be fluid, but the
Difference between smart and the
Difference between stupid
It's a fine line and everybody had to go through it
Believe this
When the people come to the hood they receive this
And make sure that nothin' ends your life
but what's prestigious
Achieving it
Thinking that all the thing's the same

Make hood for the love but
Love brings pain
But it's overjoy
Speakin' from the choirboy himself
And I know that there was time when everybody needed help

Look at wealth
Wealth brought us back to a broke situation
Everybody thought they couldn't have it
Thought they couldn't make it
And there's some feelings from inside
I know I had to take it¹⁶

Across Crowder's tiny Delta township, we pull up to one of many small, dark trailers on a quiet block. There are old cars parked where a tiny front lawn would otherwise be and a warm yellow light shines from the tiny windows of this single-wide model. TopNotch tells me I should leave the video

¹⁶ Transcript of freestyle rap from interview, Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, September 3rd, 2005.

equipment behind. I ask him how to lock the car, and he says not to worry: it's safe at this house. We walk up to the front door and knock, and a radiant older woman answers the front door. She's tepid, cautious, as she asks us to sit down in her beautiful house. Newspaper clippings and bright children's drawings cover her walls and a rainbow of calico remnants cover the floors.

In Mississippi, TopNotch has told me, young people take on second and third moms, usually older women in the community who help to nurture and encourage young people. Miss Martha Raybon, in whose home we are warm and comfortable, is TopNotch's second mom, and the reason he raps today. "I've had an open-door policy for any child," she says. Miss Martha, he explains, was his choir director at First Oak Grove Church in Crowder, where he joined the congregation at age 13. Once Miss Martha got Jerome in the choir, he became the star, improvising new lyrics to the old gospel songs, surprising his mentor--and the congregation--with his ad-libs. The Reverend Henderson may have accused him of "juke jointin'" in the church, but Miss Martha tacitly approved, marveling at Jerome's talent. Explains TopNotch:

I was 13 at the time. And what made me just do that all of a sudden is that in practicing, when we were having choir practice, we had a whole lot of people turn out... however, the people that was there for choir practice wasn't really there for church.. We knew that we couldn't do all of the parts of the actual song [ourselves], so I had to add some things in and had to take some things out. And the whole turnout was that we still got people talkin' about this to this day, so it had to be a good thing. And as much as I took a fussin' about it, sayin' that I shouldn't be juke jointin' in the church, they still talk about it to this day. Once you get pushed into a corner, you learn how to come up swinging. Basically that's what it was with the choir and...I wouldn't change a thing...

[Miss Martha] was more surprised than anything, but the thing was, when I was making up the lyrics, but she would go along with it, and everyone else would go along with it. Some days, we pulled a rabbit out of the hat...

It depends on who was leading the song. If I felt like that person wasn't coming with it, I'd give them a helping hand. Or I could be leading the song. The songs gospel-wise that I was always into were the struggle-type songs. My all-time favorite gospel song is "Troubles of the World" by Mahalia Jackson. If it don't give you chills up your spine, I don't know what to tell you. It gives me chills up my spine, and I want my rhymes to give you those same chills...It was always on the spot. It's just

something that I always just did, and it was a good outcome. It could have went bad, but it was good.

[Reverend Henderson] felt like we were cutting up like black folks in general would on a Saturday night....But I kept it right going, because I felt like I didn't do anything wrong. Once you're rejoicing, who can judge you? I know people who said they caught the Holy Ghost, and I used to think they were playing. So who's to judge? You look at it the way you look at it.¹⁷

Miss Martha rolls her eyes when TopNotch talks about his rap, saying, "He'll come back to the church—most blues singers started out that way." But her smile indicates her overwhelming pride in Jerome. In deference to Miss Martha, TopNotch challenges himself to avoid using profanity in many of his freestyles. In her home, he makes a point to quote the bible verses and black



proverbs she has taught him. He clearly defers to her as a teacher and elder. From Miss Martha, TopNotch has learned to use his facility with words and music to influence his community to positive ends. He sees his chosen hip-hop role as an extension of his part in the choir. He uses his talent to

transcend the stifling realities of life in the Delta, and to inspire others to transcend. It's that transformative power, the power of *nommo*, that connects TopNotch's work with that of his second mom and his ancestors.

We used gospel to get free. That's what I use my rap for. That's why my rhymes have a deep concern. The only way we can be free is by letting it out. That's what gospel

¹⁷ Interview, Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, October 9th, 2005 .

was to slavery. That's how they moved from place to place for freedom. This is my cry.¹⁸

As TopNotch speaks the sentences about gospel and slavery, Miss Martha speaks many of the same words in unison. She's taught TopNotch these ideas, and by adapting his gospel background to his situation, he's done right by her. He is conscious of the importance of this role and includes a didactic element in nearly all of his freestyles, pushing, like Miss Martha, for his pupils to create new meaning in the moment of performance. Miss Martha has also taught TopNotch the far-reaching nature of music.

When young ones come along and whoever wanted to be in the choir, then I would work with them. And, see, just like with Jerome, and the group that I had when he was there. They were eager, and they really wanted to learn, and we would get right in this little trailer. And I remember they were so eager, they come every day wanting to have rehearsal. Whether they knew it or not, there were people on the outside listening to them. During that time.

Back then, they would use songs just like, a, "There's Gonna be a Meeting at the Old Campground" letting the slaves know where they were gonna have a meeting that night for church.

"Wade in the Water" would tell them where to wade to to go to the Underground Railroad to escape slavery. So it was used them for a mode of communicating for them to tell where to go, where there would be a meeting for church. Because a lot of them, they were not allowed to have church, so they would have to slip and have church, and when they got ready to go away to freedom, they would have to know which direction to meet up at. So those songs would pass, or as they say, "start in one cotton field and run across to the other one" so that everybody would know where to go, where to meet up at.¹⁹

Before we leave, I ask Miss Martha if she has any questions for me. She asks if I think Jerome will make it as a hip-hop artist, and I tell her that I don't know, but that he is probably the most talented person that I've ever met. She walks us out to the car and tells me that she prayed about our meeting

¹⁸ Notes from visit between "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Martha Raybon and Ali Colleen Neff. Crowder, MS. October 7th, 2005.

¹⁹ Interview, Miss Martha Raybon, Crowder, Mississippi, July 19th, 2006.

earlier that day. As we prepare to leave, she begins to sing, in her gorgeous voice, TopNotch's favorite childhood hymn, "Just a Closer Walk with Thee."

CHAPTER FIVE: Hip-Hop's Urban/Agrarian Network

*Tribary of these rap skits, styles I mastered
Many brothers snatched it up and tried to match it
But I'm still number one, everyday real
Speak what I want, I don't care what y'all feel
'Cause I'm my own master, my Pop told me be your own boss
Keep integrity at every cost, and his home was Natchez Mississippi
Did it like Miles and Dizzy, now we gettin' busy
Bridging the gap from the blues, to jazz, to rap
The history of music on this track
Born in the game, discovered my father's music
Like Prince searchin' through boxes of Purple Rain
But my Minneapolis was The Bridge, home of the Superkids
Some are well-known, some doin' bids*

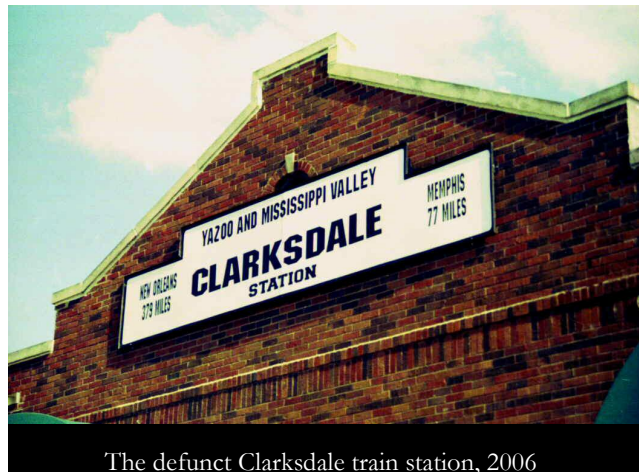
--Nas¹

The blues crossroads, a symbol of the Clarksdale's creative energy, also marks the site of an important global cultural convergence that is as much a part of the regional identity as the loamy soil upon which it is built. The unique global intersection that defines the Mississippi Delta can be traced to its history as a center for agricultural trade. The ripeness of the rich Delta soil for cotton planting led to the arrival of enterprising Anglo development in the years just before and after the Civil War. The need for massive land clearing, the creation of a levee system and the labor-intensive nature of cotton planting demanded the massive importation of slave or low-wage African and African American labor, who retained familial ties to relatives in cities and distant plantations as well as cultural ties to Africa. As the need for labor grew, Italian, Lebanese, Jewish, Mexican and Chinese

¹ Nas, "Bridging the Gap," from *Street's Disciple*, (Sony, B0006B2AFQ, 2004).

workers were brought into supplement black labor. Dissatisfied with plantation work, many international immigrants started butcher shops, dry goods markets, tamale stands, clothing stores or bootlegging operations. These immigrants were positioned between the black and white social worlds and found a niche in supplying both the planters and their workers with material goods. Clarksdale, enveloped in the vast swampy land of the Mississippi Delta, was situated at the nexus of global influence. Rather than marking the vestiges of inward-looking cultures collapsing into themselves, the foodways, craft and performance modes of the Delta represent global possibilities.

The Sunflower River and the crossing of Highways of 49 and 61 in Clarksdale were important points of convergence for both the cotton trade and the mass migrations of the early 20th Century. As reconstruction-era black laborers began to travel throughout the Deep South in search of seasonal employment, the railroad and crossroads became a



The defunct Clarksdale train station, 2006

gathering place for those moving north, visiting south, or staying a while to earn a small income chopping, picking or ginning cotton in the right seasons. The train ran through the center of Clarksdale, and black travelers could approach the window and buy a ticket north to Chicago for \$11.50. Black rail porters traded race newspapers and gossip from the big city for well wishes and gossip from down home. Boarding houses, juke joints, soul food restaurants, gambling parlors, music shops, tamale stands, bordellos, clothing stores and solid white churches lined the streets of the black downtown. The New World District became an important hub of African American musical creativity; a stop on the chitlin’

circuit and a central gathering place for the scores of plantation blues players that lived in surrounding areas.

John Work and Lewis Jones' 1941 study of the records available on Clarksdale jukeboxes shows that African American tastes in the prewar Delta were anything but provincial. Glenn Miller, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and Louis Jordan were featured prominently, as were St. Louis pianist Walter Davis, Count Basie and Fats Waller.² Jazz critic Tony Russell, in his 1971 reflection on the Coahoma County survey, was led to ask, "So what of all the blues amidst all this?...Of the 108 listings on five boxes, less than thirty are the blues..."³ Traveling workers, musicians and family members brought records and styles from across the country. The burgeoning race recording industry acted as a sort of national telephone line as musicians responded to new styles, themes and songs. Many black Deltans listened to the Grand Ol' Opry, a radio show that brought countrified versions of black minstrel tunes and gussied-up blues covers in the guise of honky-tonk over the airwaves. Big-band directors such as W. C. Handy introduced the latest in popular dance music to eager Delta listeners. Delta bluesmen and women worked these new styles into their repertoires, and reciprocated by sending their own songs into the market. Peetie Wheatstraw, the Mississippi Sheiks, "Honeyboy" Edwards, Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, Memphis Minnie and many others recorded their brand of the blues for the Vocalion, Bluebird, Paramount, Okeh, Yazoo and American labels.

Eventually, the crossroads that once drew African Americans to the Delta became a means for the Great Migration away from the South, draining guests and revelers from the

² In Gordon and Nemerov 311.

³ Ibid.. 311.

streets of the New World District. Retail chain stores drew business down the Highway, and the loss of industry and agricultural work drastically slowed the stream of visiting performers and audiences to the Delta. But the urban/rural cultural and kinship ties remained intact. Reunions and summer visits continue to bring family members back to the Delta, along with fresh expressions, styles and sounds. In turn, these visitors invigorate their expressive culture through the “country” vernacular of their Southern relatives. A Chicago cousin brings a Lupe Fiasco CD to the Delta and returns describing his dinner as “steak and skrip.” The Delta drawl, exaggerated by youth in a constant creative linguistic process, finds its way back into the big city through a Diasporic network that passes words and concepts like the recently-popular “crunk” (a word that describes a hard, bassy club aesthetic) north of the Mason-Dixon.

Cable television and commercial radio expose Delta youth to the sounds of the greater national trends in black music. Like the blues artists of the New World District, contemporary Clarksdale hip-hop artists choose their styles from a diverse array of influences and then shape them to fit the local aesthetic. Oral/musical performance, a favored expressive medium in the Delta, functions as an ideal site for the transportation of meaning. Just as the spirituals were used by slaves to communicate the arrival of the underground railroad or illicit meetings from plantation to plantation, so are contemporary musical forms used to engage African Americans in the Delta in a call and response with all corners of the African Diaspora. The work of cultural practitioners in this area is not dictated by insularity. In fact, it is the result of masterful aesthetic choices—ones made from a world of possibility. In a region where traditions of identity run particularly deep, artists remain in conversation with global trends by mixing global cultural elements into local expression. When an artistic movement called hip-hop was adopted in the urban centers of

the East Coast (and, later, the West Coast), Delta youth saw both the reflection of their own culture and a fresh set of aesthetic tools with which to express their own ideas. Rather than mimic the styles of these urban MCs, Delta youth engaged in conversation with urban black oral/musical styles. They infuse urban styles with local flavor and reversion popular pieces to fit regional expressive modes. As I will show in this chapter, the hip-hop movement is one of an infinite number of regional variations on Afrodiasporic oral/musical aesthetics; ones that remain in a dynamic network of conversations with each other. Rap is an Afrodiasporic practice; hip-hop is a movement. Rather than representing a marginal sidenote to the hip-hop phenomenon, rap in the Delta is inextricably tied into the contemporary universe of black cultural production.

Bridging the Gap

The hip-hop movement had its genesis in the 1970s Bronx, where a series of unique social and cultural circumstances converged in the form of classic New York hip-hop. Under the auspices of visionaries Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, Kool DJ Herc and others, traditional black verbal art and musical styles were reversioned to create the East Coast urban hip-hop moment. New York was folding in on itself financially; overspending had caused the city to cut its sanitation and public safety to negligible levels. An influx of immigration from the Caribbean, the flight of the city's upper-middle class tax base and a national recession meant massive unemployment and a lack of government support for the working poor. Street gangs cropped up to offer young people protection and community in the midst of the crumbling ghetto. Against this backdrop of socioeconomic depression, neighborhood youth banded together in parks and garages with crates of old funk records and their voices, and set to creating a sound that would speak to their circumstances and

needs. The functions of early hip-hop included the opportunity to express dissatisfaction in rhyme, but most importantly made social space for youth to celebrate community and identity. Kool Herc, a Jamaican immigrant, drew from the Caribbean sound system tradition and initiated impromptu dance parties in public parks. Using two turntables and a mixer, Herc and other DJs created new sounds from old records. Over the instrumental breaks, DJs rapped greetings, invitations to parties, and declarations of their own prowess to the crowds. Eventually, the DJs became so involved in technically demanding scratching and mixing techniques, they enlisted MCs to rap over their beats. Crews of MCs would challenge each other's verbal skills, and the crowd chose a winner according to which group exhibited the most aptitude and style. Like the schoolyard dozens, the competitor who could improvise the best response to the jibes of an opponent became the evening's master-of-words.

Hip-hop's first commercial record label, New Jersey's Sugar Hill records, drew its most famous artists from the outer boroughs, and brought East Coast urban rap styles onto the popular stage. The label's aim was success on the popular market, and label owners Joe and Sylvia Robinson sought to combine the vernacular sounds of hip-hop street parties and the appeal of polished pop. Indeed, the combination of catchy rap styles and reversioned commercial disco tunes immediately caught the national ear. Because the popular interest in hip-hop movement can be traced to Sugar Hill's catalog, historians often tie the genre inextricably to the context of the urban ghetto. But the language of rap, or highly stylized rhythmic/musical speech, is the traditional basis of oral expressive culture throughout the Diaspora. Sugar Hill's releases were highly stylized to appeal to a wide popular audience, and the label's bright, simple sound has come to be identified with early hip-hop. In fact, the sounds of hip-hop in the performative contexts of ghetto neighborhood gatherings and

street rap battles were stylistically more similar to the toasting traditions (which remained remarkably similar in agrarian, urban and Caribbean contexts) than popular disco hits. DJs drew from a well of southern funk classics, Jamaican sound system favorites, jazz, Puerto Rican bongo beats and classic rare grooves to create a musical score.

Connections between New York's hip-hop moment and the greater African Diaspora are manifest in the cultural identifications of hip-hop's progenitors. Afrika Bambaataa conceptualized hip-hop in terms of a movement based in a "Zulu Nation," in which multiethnic oppressed people bound together under the power of creativity. Bambaataa's guiding aesthetic principles for this movement were Afrocentric: polyrhythms, deep bass, stylistic flash, antiphony, and sampling from the old to create emergent meaning. In addition to his intra-Diasporic outreach, Bambaataa also developed an intertextual approach to hip-hop, bringing b-boying (or breakdancing) styles, turntablism (or musical creativity), graffiti art (visual aesthetics), and rapping under the hip-hop rubric.

Even in its earliest days, hip-hop changed dramatically from moment to moment. The disco stylings of the late 1970s became the New Wave sound of Grandmaster Flash, Bambaataa's 1983 robotic electro-funk hit "Planet Rock" (based in Afro-beat rhythms and German prog rock sounds) was eclipsed by the rock'n'roll swagger of Run-DMC and the mid-eighties Def Jam label. Be-bop informed the work of the late-eighties Native Tongues Posse at the same time Puerto Rican youth in New York were releasing a lightning-fast, Latin-infused dance hip-hop called freestyle. Hip-hop spread to all corners of the globe where rap already existed and fused with traditional local styles. Miami emphasized the bass drum and added Afro-Caribbean rhythmic flair, L.A. adapted the hard electro-funk dance sound, adding Arabian aesthetics to the mix. Eventually, West Coast producer Dr. Dre added the psychedelic sounds of P-Funk to his production to create the nineties' "gangsta" aesthetic.

French, Cuban, Puerto Rican and West African youth mixed the New York style into their own traditions, foregrounding the percussive spoken word where they may have previously sung a verse.

Although black residents of the Deep South are geographically removed from the East Coast urban situation, the hip-hop movement was not lost on them. Just as the Delta bluesmen once incorporated national jazz and pop styles into their performances, young masters-of-words in the Delta began to introduce elements of New York hip-hop into their strong local rap traditions. In one form or another, rap has been a prime discursive and performative tool throughout the history of the Deep South. In fact, Southern rap has both shaped and been shaped by urban black expressive culture. To separate the verbal art of the urban North and the agrarian South is to shatter a multifaceted whole.

The Southern Roots of Hip-Hop

In Chapter Four, I explored the rural roots of rap, specifically in the Mississippi Delta. But traditional Southern verbal art did much more than work its way through generations of black Southerners. It also provided—and continues to provide—a wellspring of style for hip-hop artists around the world. It could be argued that rap's first explosion onto the popular scene occurred with Durham, North Carolina chitlin' circuit comedian Pigmeat Markham's 1968 "Here Comes the Judge."

Hear ye, hear ye
'This court is now in session His Honor, Judge Pigmeat Markham presidin'
Hear ye, hear ye, the court of swing
It's just about ready to do that thing
I don't want no tears, I don't want no lies
Above all, I don't want no alibis!
'This Judge is hip, and that ain't all,
He'll give you time if you're big or small
All in line for this court is neat
Peace brother, here comes the Judge Here comes the Judge!

Everybody knows that he is the judge!⁴

Nationally recognized Delta artists (and subsequent migrants to Chicago) including Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and John Lee Hooker used a delivery style that was as percussive as it was melodic, often breaking from song to use "blues talk." Waters' "Mannish Boy" and Hooker's "Boogie Chillun" are excellent examples of the use of spoken-word delivery over repetitive instrumental riffs. Much as the extended musical break allowed New York hip-hop artists to improvise rhyme and create a rapport with audience members, Delta blues artists used a guitar dirge and rhythm to structure their improvised narrative. Southern female singers including Big Mama Thornton, Memphis Minnie, Koko Taylor and Sippie Wallace, too, used rap styles to rile up crowds and engage in dialogues of badness. Taylor, in particular, uses extended musical breaks to recite and improvise verse in the live arena.

The largest Southern contributor to the classic hip-hop aesthetic is James Brown, whose band, voice and lyrics were sampled heavily in the first decade of hip-hop. His most important aesthetic contribution to hip-hop's sound was the break, or a section of instrumental music similar to a bridge, in which the drummer (usually Clyde Stubblefield of the JB's) "breaks down" the song's rhythm either solo or with the accompaniment of a spare bass guitar. This intense section of the song provides the dancer with an opportunity to interact with the rhythm, to fill it in the spaces between the beats with his or her style. The concept of the break can also be found in traditional gospel music, where singing stops so that churchgoers can "work out" their joy in dance. In the remixed aesthetic of hip-hop, the break provides the opportunity for the DJ to play extended instrumental sections so that MCs have time to rhyme. By staggering, or "juggling" double copies of a record on two

⁴ Pigmeat Markham, "Here Comes the Judge," on *Here Comes the Judge* (Blues Journey, B00026K8YK, 1991).

turntables, the DJ could extend the break to last the entirety of a rap performance. The sound of a JB's break defines the basis of the early East Coast "old school" hip-hop sound. The fact that Brown drew inspiration for his use of the break both from the church and from Nigerian Afro-Beat illustrates his connection to traditional Diasporic styles.

On top of his rhythm-heavy instrumentation, Brown didn't exactly sing, as he certainly had on his earliest soul albums. Instead, he drew from preaching and rhyming styles from his childhood in rural Georgia to create his reversioned rapping cadence. The Diasporic aesthetics of call-and-response, polyrhythm, personal style, and repetition are foregrounded in his work. The rhetoric of urban black nationalist groups, themselves often one generation removed from Southern life, also worked its way into Brown's rap:

Though I need it - soul power
Got to have it - soul power
Though we want it - soul power
Got to have it - soul power
Give it to me - soul power
How you need it - soul power
Though I need it - soul power
Got to have it - soul power

I want to get under your skin
If I get there, I've got to, got to win

Soul power, soul power
Soul power, soul power⁵

H. Rap Brown, the Justice Minister of the Black Panther Party, employed verbal styles he learned in his hometown of Baton Rouge, Louisiana to shape the rhetoric of the Black Nationalist movement. In his tome, *Die, Nigger, Die*, Brown describes speech as a process: "I learned how to talk in the street, not from reading Dick and Jane...We learned

⁵ James Brown, "Soul Power," on *20th Century Masters: The Best Of James Brown* (Polydor / Umgd, B00000JMKD, 1999).

what the white folks called verbal skills. We learned how to throw them words together. America, however, has back folk in a serious game of the Dozens.”⁶ New York nationalist poetry group the Last Poets, often cited among the earliest recording hip-hop artists, drew clear inspiration from the music of the Deep South. They begin their 1971 recording “This Is Madness” with a paean to the timelessness of the blues.

True blues ain’t no new news ‘bout who’s been abused.
 For the blues is old as my stolen soul
 I sing the blues when the missionaries came passin’ out bibles in Jesus’ name
 I sing the blues beneath the hull of a ship under the sting of the slavemaster’s whip.
 I sing the blues in the cotton field hopin’ to make the daily yield...
 I sing the backwater blues, rhythm and blues, gospel blues, St. Louis Blues,
 crosstown blues, Chicago blues, Mississippi Goddamn! blues, Watts blues,
 Harlem blues, Hull blues, gutbucket blues, funky junky blues....
 I sing about my sho’nuf blues blackness.⁷

The use of down-home “blues talk” as a discursive site for African American cultural production continues today. New York rapper Nas’ 2004 hit “Bridging the Gap,” for instance, samples his father Olu Dara (a former resident of Natchez, Mississippi and a jazz musician) to show the continuity of agrarian and urban oral/musical styles.

In 1970s-era New York, black cinema employed the oppositional figure of the toast-teller’s badman. The “pimps,” “hustlers,” and “badasses” of the black-written, directed and produced “Blaxploitation” genre had its genesis in the traditional black folk hero who retained currency in the agrarian South. Rudy Ray Moore, a classic Blaxploitation genre actor, used material from the toasts he learned as a child in Arkansas to create a heavily-signified 1970s pimp character—a rapping, raunchy ghetto Robin Hood who saved his neighborhood from death and poverty. *Black Caesar* (with a theme song by James Brown),

⁶ In Dundes 354-355.

⁷ Last Poets, “True Blues” on *This is Madness* (Celluloid Records, B00000JWSB, 1995).

Ossie Davis' *Cotton Goes to Harlem*, and *Across 110th Street* each played out the themes of the southern badman on the streets of New York during its most dismal economic years. The “pimp” and “hustla” archetypes employed in the toasts and Blaxploitation cinema were especially useful to West Coast rappers, many of whom used the “badman” trope as a site for their performances of masculinity.

Just as popular black performers and revolutionary political speakers employed traditional styles of rhythmic speech to speak to contemporary circumstances, hip-hop's founding moments represented a synthesis of established and emergent styles. Black radio styles, which drew both upon the master-of-words traditions and new technologies, allowed DJs to comment upon and talk over the strains of popular R'n'B hits. In Clarksdale today, for instance, the prototypical club DJ style upon which early hip-hop was founded is still popular. A DJ, equipped with two turntables (or in contemporary Clarksdale, double CD players), fades one song into another to create a particular atmosphere. DJ Dr. Pepper of the Delta Blues Room (a club catering to a middle-aged African American crowd) tells me that it's not the selecting that makes a DJ popular, it's his or her ability to recognize and shout out greetings to patrons as they enter the club, to utilize or improvise witty rhymes, and to incite dancing.



Often, one person manipulates the music while another focuses strictly on rapping with the crowd. Rather than representing an imitation of New York hip-hop styles, this setup draws from local house party and juke joint traditions that call for a master or mistress of ceremonies. This function can be heard in New York hip-hop group Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 1975 classic "Superrappin'."

Take your time and you will agree
That black girl got good security
So when you walk through the door, just do me a favor
Be sure to be on your best behavior
Young man, what do you wanna do
When the party is through
And a lady wanna go home with you
You search your pocket, you're soon aware
That you don't have enough for cab fare
So you say to yourself what a mistake you made
Your heart start pumpin' right on Kool-Aid
When she walks to you and starts to say
"Call one-double-O" get down on O.J.
And you pave the way.....⁸

The similarities of contemporary DJ styles in the Delta and those of old-school hip-hop are not lost on Delta MCs. Many are known to quote freely from the Sugarhill Gang or Grandmaster Flash in the course of a vamp. In the world of black musical production, symbols, sounds and styles are freely passed between generations and regions via radio waves, videos, touring artists and traveling tradition-bearers. If we consider this rich call-and-response between the agrarian South and the urban center, hip-hop becomes de-centered from the context of the Northeastern urban ghetto. Many early hip-hop theorists, concerned primarily with contemporary trends in popular hip-hop development, focused on the history of the hip-hop movement rather than its Diasporic aesthetic connections. If we focus on the

⁸ Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, "Superrappin'" on *The Best of Enjoy Records* (Hot Productions, B000001QIX, 1990).

entirety of the rap aesthetic, however, divisions of era and region fall away to expose rich interplay of influence and innovation independent of the urban context.

Hip-Hop's Third Coast

Although Southern rappers tend to identify themselves as such (rather than “hip-hop artists”) their membership in the hip-hop movement, although often quite different from that of urban artists, has undeniable influence on global musical trends. By infusing contemporary hip-hop and personal styles into their traditional cultural production, southern groups have made space for themselves in the world of popular music. The first breakthrough for southern hip-hop was the arrival of Miami booty-bass in the form of Luke Skyywalker’s 2 Live Crew, which fused the sounds of New York electro and freestyle variations with Afro-Latin percussive aesthetics. This music is highly rhythmic and club-oriented. Bass music features less complex lyrics than its New York counterpart. Artists draw from children’s rhyming games and folk dance styles to engage the audience in group dance. Houston’s Geto Boys used West-Coast “gangsta” scripts to discuss their experience with southern poverty. Atlanta group Arrested Development, drawing from their childhood experience in rural Tennessee, built their aesthetic around themes of Southern folklife, sampling acoustic/folk instruments and speaking to the importance of tradition. In 1992, after “3 Years, 5 Months & 2 Days in the Life Of...” trying to release their first record (also the title of their album), they scored a pop chart-topping hit with “Tennessee.” The group sampled the song’s beats from Minneapolis artist Prince while also conjuring the fife-and-drum aesthetic of their neighbors in Mississippi hill country. They reference folk traditions such as double-dutch and horseshoes as well as the kind of personal spirituality that defines the plantation church.

Lord it's obvious we got a relationship
 Talkin' to each other every night and day
 Although you're superior over me
 We talk to each other in a friendship way
 Then outta nowhere you tell me to break
 Outta the country and into more country
 Past Dyersburg into Ripley
 Where the ghost of childhood haunts me
 Walk the roads my forefathers walked
 Climbed the trees my forefathers hung from
 Ask those trees for all their wisdom
 They tell me my ears are so young (home)
 Go back to from whence you came (home)
 My family tree my family name (home)
 For some strange reason it had to be (home)
 He guided me to Tennessee (home)⁹

In a 1993 article on the group for Vibe Magazine, bell hooks discusses the cultural connections between agrarian and urban black communities with Arrested Development leader Speech:

BELL: People forget that before 1960 many Black people lived in the agrarian South. As someone who has experienced both the urban life of Atlanta and the rural life of Tennessee, how has Southern life inspired you?

SPEECH: I felt a special warmth spending time there while growing up. I felt like I was being embraced down South. I also felt the spirits of a lot of our ancestors who had been enslaved and hanged from trees and who had worked those fields calling me. They gave me ideas and thoughts. Down South, I feel warm, almost as if the ancestors are speaking to me or holding me.¹⁰

Southern groups including Atlanta's Outkast and Bowling Green's Nappy Roots sample folk tradition in various ways. Whether it's an acoustic guitar, a looped blues chorus, a reference

⁹ Arrested Development "Tennessee" on *3 Years 5 Months & 2 Days in the Life of—* (Capitol, B000003JBE, 1992).

¹⁰ bell hooks, "Speech: A Love Rap - Leader of Rap Group Arrested Development -Interview" (*Essence Magazine*, Nov. 1993).

to folkdance, soul food or church, these groups merge the Southern experience with national trends.

An alternative take on the adaptation of southern folk tradition to contemporary circumstances can be seen in the “gangsta” aesthetic that defines much of southern hip-hop today. This style draws from numerous iterations of the badman tradition: the stories of violent tricksters such as Dolemite, the “playa” who could skew the odds in games of chance, or the ghetto figure of the “pimp,” whose personal style and facility with words heavily inspired West-Coast artists Snoop Dogg and Ice-T. Black communities on the West Coast expanded greatly with the building of munitions factories during WWII, and many families migrated West to these areas from the Delta, Louisiana, Houston and other areas of the Deep South for job opportunities. The family ties between residents of these areas remain strong. Artists such as Oakland’s Too \$hort and Mississippi’s David Banner travel freely between the urban West Coast and the South. They carry with them the cultural traditions of the South and their reinterpretations, thus remaining relevant to both groups.

The laid-back, West Coast hip-hop style that emerged in the early 1990s shows a strong connection between agrarian and urban aesthetics. Central to this sound was Snoop Dogg, a Long Beach, California rapper whose parents hail from Mississippi. Snoop Dogg’s signature was his slow southern “country” drawl and his use of extra syllables to lengthen his words. His rhymes drew from agrarian children’s games and the badman swagger. Snoop’s cousin Nate Dogg, a Clarksdale-Long Beach transplant, became the first rapper from the Delta to appear on the national scene. He learned his smooth vocal style in the choir of New Hope Trinity Baptist Church in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where his father remains a pastor. The seminal figure in the re-centering of the hip-hop aesthetic westward was Snoop and Nate Dogg producer Dr. Dre, whose mid-nineties production styles draw heavily from the

multi-layered, dirgy blues aesthetic. His song “Lyrical Gangbang,” from his seminal 1992 release, the *Chronic*, samples Led Zeppelin’s version “When the Levee Breaks,” a song about the great 1927 Delta flood written by Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie.

Nelly, a St. Louis-based rapper with roots in Austin, Texas, employed the sounds of southern rhyming games on his breakthrough 2000 album, *Country Grammar*, which set the stage for the direct involvement of southern hip-hop artists on the popular scene. The floodgates for the emergence of--and backlash against--hip-hop from the so-called “Dirty South” had begun. After the national rise of Atlanta-based groups Outkast, Goodie Mob, a new southern hip-hop style called “crunk” rose from the South. Atlanta-based rapper and producer Lil’ Jon, a former resident of Clarksdale, synthesized the syrupy sounds of Miami booty bass, Houston’s “screwed and chopped,” super-slow sound, and the shouted staccato of gangsta styles to create an aesthetic statement of unadulterated southern-ness. The result caught fire on the international market, and the sounds of southern hip-hop superseded the national popularity of coastal styles. In response decades of coastal dominance in the realm of popular rap, Southern artists conjured hip-hop’s “Third Coast” as a site for stylistic innovation.

The badman figure found new currency in the guise of the crunk artist. In 2006, Triple Six Mafia, a Memphis group, gained fame by winning an Oscar for their theme song for *Hustle and Flow*, a film about a Memphis hip-hop artist who arises from the streets of Orange Mound, Memphis’ most dangerous black ghetto. Although the film itself raises questions of representation (after all, many southern rappers consciously adopt a performative pimp persona without internalizing antisocial values), *Hustle and Flow* has turned the popular eye toward the work of hip-hop artists from “Memphissippi,” an imaginary neighborhood where the traditions of the agrarian South meet urban technologies of creativity and survival.

Levell Crump, a.k.a. David Banner, a contemporary Jackson, Mississippi rapper with a larger-than-life persona (his moniker comes from the “other name” of comic superhero The Incredible Hulk), began to rise on the national popular music scene in the new millennium. His formerly-independent record label (Crooked Lettaz, for all the “s’s” in the name of his state) has achieved great commercial success Banner broadcasts his richly signified message, drawn from a deep well of regional expression, to new audiences far and wide. His songs often feature an interlude in which he calls out to his urban relatives: “this is where your grandmamma came from!”

In 2004, Banner used the newfound cultural capital he gained from his video stardom to rally for the exhumation of Emmett Till’s body, insisting that his own body be photographed regularly in a t-shirt reading, “RIP Emmett Till.” Till’s body was exhumed for the collection of further evidence in 2005. Banner hopes to see Till’s murderers prosecuted posthumously. In “Mississippi,” Banner’s alternative state anthem, the artist uses words and rhythm to send a message loud and clear:

Mississippi, you know what I’m talkin’ bout¹¹
The home of the blues, the dirtiest part of the South
You know what I’m talkin’ about
The place where you get them fish and them grits...
You know what I’m talkin’ about
Delta...
Cotton, you know what I’m talkin’ about
We bout to free the slaves...

Mississippi musical artists, in conversation with their counterparts in the north, continue to signify on the intersection of history and identity today. In an interesting

¹¹ This lyrical selection has been expurgated as the expletives used serve a rhythmic purpose that, without accompanying audio, appear decontextualized on the written page. David Banner, “Mississippi” on *Mississippi* (Umvd Labels, B000095J4F, 1993).

signification on his musical and cultural heritage, Banner entitled his third album, *Mississippi II: Baptized in Dirty Water*.

Bass Is the Place

Throughout the iterations of popular stylistic trends, the distinctive styles of Southern hip-hop continue to reflect a sense of place. In the Dirty South, identity is expressed through in the liminal space where language meets rhythm. Only very recently have Clarksdale rappers begun to record. Thus, the main mode of hip-hop production takes place in the realm of the local community. While many Clarksdale youth listen to popular Crunk music at the club or in their cars, rap is a part of everyday life that does not require a premixed soundtrack. Nightly, young people meet on street corners on a walk to the barbeque stand or a friend's house, and challenge each other to a rap battle.

After school, Jerome and his friends would watch rap videos on B.E.T., fascinated by what their urban counterparts were doing with rhyme and music. They soon began to fit their rap with the beat of popular black media, creolizing urban hip-hop culture with Delta oral culture. Soon, according to Topnotch, they adapted the pop form to the folk culture of the Delta:

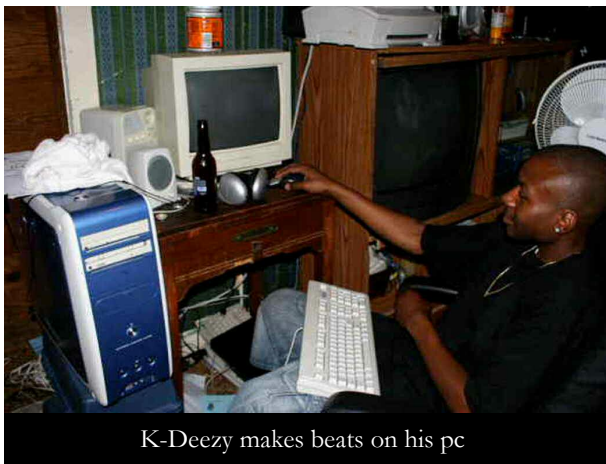
On street corners, everybody would get in a little huddle and everybody would spit a freestyle verse. And basically that's what I wanted to show you, that we still do that now...

We all emulate styles, that's how we grew up. We just do it off the TV, or hear the radio, or hear people rappin' that don't fit the song, we'll rap over 'em freestyle. We got people out there who want to challenge each other with freestyle battle duels... Just degrading another rapper for your personal gain, I was never really for it. So as a freestyle artist, I just put in words that people never thought about.... Getting in freestyle huddles, that's what we took from New York. Or freestyle dancing... The difference is that we did it Southern, like Southern cooking, everybody in the world know about that soul food cooking: it's good for your soul. Maybe it wasn't good for our health, but it was good for our soul... We made it Southern and we made it happen, even

when we messed up, we thought that it was great—we didn't care how people how the way people thought it would sound. We did it our way.¹²

TopNotch, inspired by the rappers he saw on TV, continues to develop his rhyming skills. He dreams of his voice coming through radios worldwide, changing his challenges into opportunity, his “doubts into diamonds.”¹³

Just as the work of the griots found new permutations on southern plantations, traditionally southern oral/musical styles make their way to the urban centers of the North



and to global popular culture at large. Today, New York artists such as Mims and West Coast rappers including Oakland's E-40, Senegalese-American singer Akon, and Jamaican dancehall artists incorporate Southern bass, speech patterns and slang into their repertoires.

The recent Bay Area Hyphy movement, for instance, shares a particularly hard, slangy vocabulary with Southern hip-hop, along with dance moves that resemble both New York's Afro-Rican B-boys and humorous Southern club styles. And in the neighborhoods, schoolyards, living rooms and clubs throughout the Diaspora, young black people gather and they rap, remixing all that they have heard, all that they are, and all that they want to say in the realm of rhyme.

¹² Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, October 8th, 2005.

¹³Ibid.

CHAPTER SIX: The Undivided Road

"Don't stress; innovate."

--TopNotch the Villain

East Tallahatchie Street traces the vestiges of old Highway 49, a thin east-west stretch across the southern black belt. It's a lonely path that cuts from Hopson plantation to the New World District; a route used only by locals who use it to bypass the two-lane highway. Few lights reveal the crumbling road ahead, pockmarked with potholes and gaping divots. A rotting sofa lies broken across the right half of the road. Garbage lines its banks. I pass Red Panther Chemical, the site of a massive toxic spill in the late 1960s. It is defunct



Free Greens on East Tallahatchie, Clarksdale, MS 2006

now, surrounded by a concrete lot and a tall chain link fence. The side streets that cross this route hide lines of tainted water, believed by many locals to contribute to the

high cancer rates in the area. The federal Superfund environmental cleanup program broke open this road a few months earlier to cart away the carcinogenic soil beneath, and a few blocks of pavement are a paler, smoother grey than the rest.

My headlights shine on a handpainted note taped to an old traffic blockade and nestled in a patch of green roadside to my left. “FREE Greens Just Help Your Self,” it reads. Three faces appear in the night: a man and a woman in old clothing, poor. His head is covered with a damp white towel. She’s holding a long baby in her arms and looks exhausted. I imagine they live in one of handful of shacks scattered throughout this route—tiny vestiges of housing built for sharecroppers at the turn of the century without running water, electricity or glass windows. Wrecked cars from the highway linger on dirt mounds in their front yards. Once, Martin Luther King led residents of the area past these very houses to Marks, Mississippi, where the group commenced the 1968 Poor People’s march on Washington. Residents of these houses, too poor to buy vehicles, often walk miles to and from home by this treacherous route daily. Drivers must be careful to drive slowly down the road; its overgrown edges make it impossible for pedestrians to walk anywhere but its tattered lanes. The cracked concrete makes for a slow ride.

As my car approaches the crossroads, I look in my rear view mirror. A large white van of meandering tourists follows behind me, trailed by a third vehicle. I rarely see other travelers on this road and know the group is on their way to the New World district juke joints that have opened after a local blues festival. I’m stopping by one of these shows to see “T-Model” Ford, one of my favorite Hill Country bluesmen perform before heading back to North Carolina. My radio is tuned to WROX, and Southern Soul music filters from my windows. I hate leaving Clarksdale, a place where I have built the most meaningful friendships of my life. But I don’t belong here, either. This town doesn’t belong to me.

I stop at a crooked sign and a group of overgrown railroad ties. I’m at the old crossroads again. To my right, down old 61 (a decade ago it was renamed after Dr. King), is a chicken wings stand that advertises four flavors: “MILD,” “HOT,” “HONEY GOLD”

and “MISSISSIPPI BURNING.” Half a block down my left is Messenger’s lounge, the old juke joint where men would shoot dice and tell outrageous toasts. Ahead of me is the last vestiges of the path that I am on: East Tallahatchie Street. After the crossroads, it passes a dark bar packed with Brickyard residents on the left and then crumbles into dust at the dark railroad tracks.

I turn left and park half a block down, just in front of Messenger’s. The moment I open my car door, red and blue lights flash in the dark sky. I turn around to see two Sheriff’s Deputies approaching the big white van that followed me down Tallahatchie. They tell me loudly to get back in my car as well. A large cop, his skin the color of sand, approaches my window.

“Have you been drinkin’?”

“No sir,” I reply.

“Well, where were you before you drove down here?” he asks, his belly nearly toughing my door.

I have the feeling that I should come up with something to say, but what? I don’t know how to answer. “At Hopson Commissary, sir.” I’m shaking, confused.

“Get out of the car.”

As quickly as that, I am bent over the trunk of my car and handcuffed, pushed into the back of the waiting car. I am alone, and can just barely dig my phone from my pocket and make a call. I get Tim’s voicemail and leave a message to tell him that I’ve been arrested. Then I call TopNotch. I don’t know what he can do to help, but I feel like he’s my best ally in this. He tells me to stay calm and that I’ll be okay. The deputy approaches the car and I hang up, put it back in my pocket. I see the Sheriffs arrest the driver of the big white van, and I recognize two of its passengers--tourists from area blues festivals. Then I see a tow

truck hitch up my battered old car and tow it away. I've just started graduate school and am down to my last \$75 dollars, my gas money for the ride home.

It's a three-block ride to the Police Station, and I say nothing as the deputy drives me slowly to our destination. When I arrive at the police station, I see a number of white blues tourists waiting in handcuffs in the holding area. I don't know what's going on or why I'm here. I catch a glimpse of the jail cells down the hall. They're scraped nearly free of paint where prisoners used their fingernails to scratch out messages. Filthy sheets line cardboard mattresses. I'm terrified.

We're moved into a smaller cell in our handcuffs. I see a tourist I know, Mark, who was in the big white van behind me. He's been drinking a little. He's calm. I realize I've been swept up in a drunk-driving sting, set up for tourists tooling around the black side of town. They drive from the countryside blues festivals to the downtown juke joints, and many have a few beers along the way. In my entire year of living in the Delta, I never knew of anyone to get arrested for drunk driving. Tonight is different.

But why didn't they ask me to touch my fingers to my nose, ask me to recite the alphabet backwards, or have me blow in a machine before they arrested me, let alone read me my rights?

We stand for half an hour, handcuffs intact, before the Sheriff's Deputies line us up and guide us two by two into a room with a massive breathalyzer machine. A wiry little white deputy sits on a card table next to the machine, smiling. The barrel-chested light-skinned black deputy who arrested me lined the far wall, scowling. Mark looks at me nervously. I'm nervous, too. I don't understand the logic behind my arrest, and I don't trust anything the cops have in store. They tell me to blow.

Moments later, a look of bemusement crosses the little white guy's face. "I guess she wasn't drunk after all!" he chortles. But the handcuffs stay on.

My handcuffs stay on as Mark blows a bit over the legal limit for driving. His handcuffs stay on, too. We wait for half an hour alone in the room until he is lead away. I'm alone now, handcuffs intact. The deputies begin to fill out pages and pages of paperwork, finally asking me for identification. They pull out a traffic citation, place my name in the upper right-hand corner, and fill out an invented offense: "Careless Driving." The handcuffs stay on.

The cops begin to process Mark's paperwork. It takes over an hour, and I sit silent. The clock reads 11:45, almost three hours since my arrest. I wonder about my car, about my bags and my stuff. I won't make class in North Carolina tomorrow. Finally, the shorter cop unlocks me cuffs and tell me to follow him. He points toward the back seat of his car. "I couldn't let you walk out in this bad neighborhood by yourself." He drives me up a ramp that runs from the swampy riverside to the side of Sunflower road, where the white van's passengers are waiting for us. Eventually, Mark is released, and we make our way to the tow yard to rescue my car. They'll lend me the hundred dollars to get me out of tow. I hug them goodbye and enter the tow-yard office. Alone with the tow truck operator in a big tin garage off Tallahatchie, I feel uncomfortable. He's too close. I shove the money in his hand and rev up my car as he finally opens the garage door.



Mr. Tater the Music Maker, Red's Juke Joint

There's no way I'm gonna drive back to Chapel Hill tonight. I'm shaking, nervous, and lonely. I get behind my wheel and drive down to Red's juke joint, where a smattering of patrons are finishing their last drinks of the night: an older, black couple with Jheri-curved hair who make matching outfits from discount remnants; a drunk younger girl in a tight tank top; and my favorite dancing partner, Mr. Tater, a local bluesman with an incomprehensible speech impediment and a wonderful smile. Red grins behind his deep red sunglasses and asks me where I've been. I start to bawl. "Red," I say. "I was arrested!"

Red pauses for a moment and looks at me. He hints that my North Carolina license plates might have been a sign of opportunity for the tow company operator and his friends. And then Red stands in the center of the room, his booming voice rising above the blues on the stereo.

"I'm sorry that this happened to you. But let me tell you what it's like to be a black person in Clarksdale, Mississippi," he says, and then commences into an intense, time-stopping oratory, detailing each time he's been arrested, all for nothing. He tells me that he's had to live his whole life prepared for the moment when a person is just going about his business, and then a finger is pointed. A black person in Mississippi only has so much control over his own body, he says, because it can be handcuffed at any time, for any reason. I'm sipping a beer now, slowly, as I absorb Red's midnight sermon.

The couple at the bar shouts back at Red as he speaks, "Right on." Mr. Tater agrees vociferously. I am feeling so much better, but still kind of sick, like the days after an immunization shot. The truth hurts, but it makes me stronger. The red lights of the bar warm us like a fire.

I Am Trying to Learn Your Language

When Tim and I first arrived in Clarksdale, we were swamped with invitations to tea or nightcaps from local whites. They were curious about who we were, why we had come to Clarksdale from California. They offered us management jobs at their restaurants and places



View from author's front door, Clarksdale, 2004

to stay. Some of our new friends were kind and supportive, relieving the stress from our big move with humorous stories of Clarksdale's past, beery trips to the levee, or canoe journeys down the Mississippi River. They took us to local juke joints and showed us where to find Robert Johnson's multiple graves. They became close allies as I dove into my research, sharing their own knowledge of local history to round out my understanding of how the Delta works.

A few white practitioners of "Southern hospitality," however, particularly those with deep investments in the racial status quo, were not so kind. Their enthusiasm lasted approximately two weeks, until our political views and intentions to work with the local black community were made sufficiently clear. The front-porch sweet tea sessions dried up, and Tim and I were relieved not to have to find ways to handle the racist comments and ideas that were bandied about their afternoons. Some residents of Clarksdale's historic "big houses"—those described by former Clarksdale resident Tennessee Williams in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, were clearly not interested in interlopers.

I lost my job as a journalist at the local paper directly after covering the ideas of local black middle school students regarding the War in Iraq. At a role-playing mock presidential election at the school, John Kerry won two-thirds of the vote. The students expressed their support for any candidate who would bring their cousins and siblings home from the war. Nearly all of these students from Clarksdale's poorest neighborhoods know a soldier personally-- many young Delta men and women look to the military for employment and educational opportunities not available in their hometown. The day the story ran, I received a call at my desk. The voice on the other end, sounding vaguely familiar, told me, "we don't like outsiders here." Online responses to my article from local whites cropped up:

Fed Up Nov, 03 2004:

This only shows how our tax dollars are being wasted in the hood.

Paul Fowler Nov, 03 2004:

These kids will grow up looking for free cheeze too, unless they quit thinking like their parents. I suspect the writer of the article injected a whole lot of their opinion in this. Thank God they were 100% wrong...¹

The backlash to what I thought was a straightforward article astounded me. I was also reeling from an incident weeks earlier, in which a strange white "politician" appeared at my desk to discuss his candidacy for the state legislature. His behavior toward his black "driver" seemed odd, as did his comments about race. "I want to stop racial and social profiling against blacks, rednecks and college students by punishing cops who make bad arrests with 90 days of jail time," he said. A quick web search turned up his involvement in the defense of Sam Bowers, a KKK Grand Wizard convicted of the 1964 slayings of three civil rights activists in Neshoba County, Mississippi. I was worried about mentioning this

¹Ali Neff, "Young 'voters' are worried about war" in *The Clarksdale Press-Register* (Copyright © 1995 - 2007 Townnews.com, November 01, 2004) Available at: http://www.zwire.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=13265126&BRD=2038&PAG=461&dept_id=230617&rfti=8

connection in my article, but decided not to hedge. Nothing came of the incident. But all this talk about race was wearing out my welcome at the paper, which is sponsored largely by wealthy white business owners. Shortly thereafter, I received a call at my desk. "We don't like strangers here," said the voice on the other line. I felt like I knew that voice well, but couldn't quite place it.

A March 2007 Page 1 op-ed piece on the tragedy of Clarksdale's school integration (in 1970) by the current editor of the paper sums up the taboos I had inadvertently transgressed:

I was asked recently what were the biggest changes that I had seen in Clarksdale since my early years as a child. Without question, I answered, the destruction of our neighborhood schools by the federal courts in 1970. That single one move began the slow deterioration of the Delta that is now in its 37th year. It hit this area harder than any earthquake that ever trembled or shook San Francisco. Since 1970, thousands of people have been smacked hard in the pocketbook, attempting to pay for both public and private education. When it was no longer feasible for them, most of these folks just packed up and moved to other areas of the state or country where the livin' was a little easier...

With the advent of legal alcohol sales and liquor by the drink, restaurants were the first to offer alcohol to those who dined. But by the early 1970s, bars and honky tonks sprung up and offered liquor by the drink...

With this newfound way of socializing, lifestyles began to change and change drastically. Women no longer were "prudes" like many of them had been tagged previously. These same women began to wear pants more often than not, discarding dresses they had worn for a lifetime. And being around men in bars at night, unfortunately even changed their language habits and the way they spoke. Through the sixties, women never cursed in public and most men respected them enough not to used four-letter words in their presence. The legalization of alcohol some 40 years ago has changed our lives drastically and it affected us in a thousand other ways.²

² Bubba Burnham, "Oh! For those days of illegal alcohol" in *The Clarksdale Press-Register* (Copyright © 1995 - 2007 Townnews.com, March 09, 2007). Available at: http://www.zwire.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=18054761&BRD=2038&PAG=461&dept_id=230617&rfti=8

The “integrated” public schools of the Delta were largely abandoned by whites, who self-segregated their children in private white academies. The rejection of the principles behind the Brown vs. Board ruling of 1953 is a common cause discussed on the gilded front porches of Clarksdale.

Tim and I couldn’t find a rental house in town. For reasons we didn’t immediately recognize, white landlords told us that there was nothing for us in a town half-full of abandoned housing. We eventually found a spot near Highway 1, on the periphery of Sherard Plantation, where the wealthy remnants of the planter family, as well as the families of their white overseers and black workers remain in minimal housing. We rented half of a rotting duplex with an open septic system in the shadow of the old cotton gin. In return for our rent, our working-class white landlords offered not to “rent the other half to niggers.” An extended African American family lived through a patch of cane break near the roadside. The father of the family had been working on the Sherard plantation in exchange for a small paycheck and housing, but when he fell out of favor with management, he was told to move. Because his pay had been too minimal to save rent for a new place to stay, the family remained for months, trying to patch rent together. In the meantime, the plantation boss cut off water and power to the house. They stopped by sometimes to get water for their infant’s formula or to collect the turnip greens our yard grew in abundance. Their two school-aged girls kept their status a secret at school and did their homework by candlelight. When the family did suddenly move, they left Tim and I plastic bags of perishable condiments as a goodbye gift.

We were invited to a nearby black church, Pleasant Grove Missionary Baptist, by a friend and began to meet community members there. On weekends, Tim and I found juke joints in the country to visit or asked locals where to find the blues. We made house visits to

friends in the community and caused a stir when we invited our friends, black and white, to our house for parties. We dealt with stares, comments and alienation. All the while, we were learning the language of the Mississippi Delta at church, in conversation, over the waves of WROX and through the blues. Finally, we were invited to the little house parties and gospel practices and living rooms of those who became my friends and consultants. The spring after our arrival in the Delta, I was introduced to TopNotch at a little juke joint down Highway 49.

In my three years in the Delta, I've been able to find a place for myself in Clarksdale's musical community. But I couldn't just drive down Highway 61 and shimmy my way inside. It was only through series of interactions, conversations and reputations that I was accepted into my role as an ethnographic collaborator. Scores of journalists, filmmakers, promoters and researchers have paraded through the Delta since it gained its reputation as "the birthplace of the blues." Their process usually involves setting up an paid interview or two with well-known bluesmen Super Chickan, "T Model" Ford or "Honeyboy" Edwards and a visit to the tourist spots that fill with blues travelers on summer weekends. Some write films or books about the Delta blues experience. Over the course of my research in the Delta, a number of major investors have bought out the bulk of the downtown. A Hollywood movie star has teamed with a local white businessman to spur the local tourism industry through a fine-dining "soul food" restaurant and a clubby "juke joint" where the stage is raised five feet above the shiny white crowd. The story of the birth of the blues has cache for those who dream of saving it from death.

And there are those who just love the music. Standing under the bright blues crossroads marker at midnight, they seek just a touch of blues conjuration.

I didn't have a particular project in mind when I arrived at the crossroads. I knew that I wanted to learn more about this music that had nourished the American sound. The more I made my way through the Delta, the more I realized that the Delta was telling me to listen. I had to give it "Delta Time," a term locals use to mean that things happen according to the priorities of fate. I had to stop imposing my own ideas about the blues, my lines of authenticity that bound my understandings into a little box. When I listened, I heard the blues in the voices of the radio DJs, in the tomes of the church incantations, in the sounds of the kids rapping at the end of every Delta street. My many nights in the juke joints shook my assumptions out of me. I had to come to terms with the fallacy of my expectations. Finally, I had to experience the power of the word in Red's juke joint the night of my arrest. It was all that I had, and it healed me.

Collaboration Conversation

TopNotch trusted me to step into his life and represent it to the outside world. To me, to share this kind of trust means that I believe in TopNotch's power to represent himself. As an ethnographer, I can shape a story, elicit it in the fullness of its context, experience it as a participant and describe it as an observer. But ultimately, I owe it to my consultants to give them space for their own representations. They mean too much to me as community members, friends and adopted family to do otherwise. As a woman ethnographer, I bring to the table my understanding of what it feels like to be looked at by strangers. I have tried in all I have done to never let my gaze hit the side of anyone's face. My photography and my writing, I hope, allows my consultants to gaze back into the camera, to offer self-representations. I believe it was my willingness to engage the

community of the Mississippi Delta on this level that led me to the Love Zone that hot summer night.

TopNotch has visited UNC three times now to lecture University classes and perform. He's developed a considerable following on campus, and cooks buckets of soul food for his new college friends each time he visits. He met a student in one of those classes, a Ph.D. student in French Literature from New Orleans, and fell in love. He's been laid off from his job at the hospital and made the decision to attend community college full time. He wants to learn digital technology, but he's excelling in his speech class. We will continue to collaborate on projects, including a book that will develop from this thesis.

TopNotch and I have also had success with a short film we co-directed, along with UNC Communications graduate student Brian Graves, about the connections between Delta hip-hop, the blues and gospel. The film features Big T and Miss Martha, as well as performances by DA F.A.M., who continue to gain popularity throughout the Delta. They've recorded over 20 songs now and are performing in local rap showcases and workshops. The local paper, briefly under a hip-hop friendly editor, featured a story about their work on the front page with the headline, "Bridging the Gap from Blues to Rap." The group gained press throughout the state for a showing of



Documentary directors Brian Graves, TopNotch and the author in front of the marquee for their film, Clarksdale, 2007

our documentary at the old Coahoma Cinemas. I hauled a red carpet down from Chapel Hill for the gathering, which drew together two hundred locals including the state senator, a few bluesmen, a churchfull of school kids, family members, blues journalists and Red. The theatre owner put our film's title on the marquee of the formerly segregated theatre: "Let the World Listen Right." The local tourism magazine took photos of the group standing under their name in lights.

Yata had a baby in February 2007, a healthy boy named Jamarkis Jazez Dear. She'll get her GED and driver's license by summer. She knows she'll be a great mom, and she's already teaching her baby to rap.

Miss Martha was called by the Spirit to preach. Her face lights up when she talks about her vocation. She's got joy to spread and people to teach.

Life in Clarksdale continues when I am not there. In the moments when I realize this, I feel like an observer; an outsider to the community to which I have become so attached. But I return to the Mississippi every couple months and find myself folded right back into the groove.

The last night Tim and I spent in the Delta before moving to Chapel Hill, Red told us to come down and join him for a drink at his club. We'd been through a trying thirteen months in the Delta, and we were nervous about our upcoming move. We had finally started to settle in; to run on Delta time. As we drove up to the club, however, we could see that something was going on. Big old vans, shiny bright Chevys and certified clunkers lined Sunflower Avenue. Red was waiting at the door, eyes smiling above the rims of his red sunglasses. The door to his juke joint was propped open, and a crowd awaited us inside. It was a group of friends, gathered together to sing us out of town. Mr. Tater was ready to dance, and Wesley "Junebug" Jefferson and Big T pounded out the sounds of our favorite

Delta blues songs. The rappers we had met just a few months before were there, too, giant cans of Bud in their hands, insulated in swaths of paper towels. Around midnight, Junebug took the room down and sang us a few new verses—an improvised song about the Tim and me driving a broken old van from California to spend some time with the blues in Clarksdale.

The next morning, we were ready to go. We drove up to the crossroads, looked back in the direction from whence we had come, and chose the opposite path.

CONCLUSION: Let the World Listen Right

If the crossroads mark the path across the realms of the living and the dead, then music represents the life force of the blues people of the Mississippi Delta. The title of this work comes from a conversation TopNotch and I had in the earliest weeks of our collaboration. For him, this project represents a way to build an audience for his art; to strengthen the connections between his community and those outside of the South. He plans to stay in the Delta, to use his voice to rally for new job opportunities, improved educational funding, the recognition of the voices of young practitioners of the living blues. His raps entertain, tell stories, solidify friendships, and declare identity. Most importantly, they transcend the difficulties of daily life under the Delta's dire circumstances, and they lead others to do the same.

The feeling he gets when he really starts to flow in his raps, when the words just come together and the rhythm catches, is the same feeling he had when he used to sing at church. No matter what's going on with his unstable job, his health, his friends or his family, he forgets it all when he feels the spirit. I can see it on his face when he's rapping; I get caught up in it, too. This is how he describes it:

Now in my raps or what have you, how the way it transcends, or how the way I catch this Holy Spirit or what have you, is that I catch this, I just keep rappin', and the more I start makin' sense and the more you begin to feel it, the more crunk, you know what I'm sayin', you get, you know what I'm sayin' or what have you

The more live, the more, you know the energy start a-flowin', and it's like, for me it comes like from my toes and it goes into my feet and it goes like to my ankles, and it goes to my shin to my calf to my knees to my thighs to my hips to my waist belly to my heart to my chest to my throat to my brain. And then

once it gets to the point where you can't hold it in your body no more, it just all comes out in one big ol' blur and it's just beautiful music.¹

Miss Martha Raybon finds herself feeling a similar when she's hitting the ringing notes of a favorite gospel song, such as Mahalia Jackson's "Troubles of the World:"

Soon I will be done with the troubles of this world
'Troubles of the world
'Troubles of the world
'Troubles of this world
'Troubles of the world
Soon I will be done with the troubles of this world
I'm goin' home to live with God.
I'm goin' home to live with my God.

Miss Martha taps a deep spiritual power when she sings at church. It's her relief from the rigors of the week; from her struggles with the bills. She loves her assignment as the church choir director, to share the power of the Spirit with the young ones so that they can carry their song beyond the confines of her trailer, beyond the walls of the church. She smiles when she describes the power of song in her life:

When the Holy Spirit take over, ooh, you have...you're just out of control. You don't know... you know, ooh. The singin'. And a lot of people will tell you, the power that go with you singin' that song. And how it made them feel and how it makes you feel. It makes you feel, a lot of times, that'll just make you forget all cares, all worries, all everything.²

Like Miss Martha, Yata finds that the power of the word transcends the issues of everyday life. In the creative space of rhyme and song, she feels "lifted up."

Like when you rappin', you just let yourself, let yourself go. Same thing like people do in church. When you feel a song, you just let yourself go. And usually when you do that you rap better or sing better because you just rappin' or you singin' from your soul, which really just lift up everything, and

¹ Interview, Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, July 17th, 2006.

² Interview, Miss Martha Raybon, Crowder, Mississippi, July 19th, 2006.

it just comes out better result than not feeling your song and just rapping to be rappin'.³

Miss Martha reports that when Jerome would attend choir practice as a child, his group did not realize that her neighbors were standing outside of her trailer, listening to their voices. Today, TopNotch knows that his voice can cross the firmest of boundaries.

We had been filming in the Mississippi Delta the entire month of July, dragging our heavy equipment through the hundred-degree humidity and dusty Delta silt, and we were tired. After dozens of interviews, long days of driving down back roads and fifty hours of rich footage, we were still unsure how we wanted to end our short documentary on hip-hop



TopNotch prepares for the final segment of his documentary, Hopson Plantation, MS, 2006

³ Interview, Kimyata Dear, Clarksdale, Mississippi, July 15th, 2006.

in the Mississippi Delta. TopNotch and I had been collaborating for two years in an effort to represent the music of young people in the Delta to new audiences in an accurate light. With the help of another UNC graduate student, we committed our summer to co-directing a multimedia portrait of the contemporary musical landscape of the region. The labor was exhausting in the thick summer atmosphere, but we were driven by the opportunity to share our work with a wider audience.

We spent the day recording TopNotch freestyling rhymes about various aspects of life in the Mississippi Delta for use in the film's soundtrack. Meanwhile, I was preparing to pack up and head back to North Carolina in just a few days to begin the editing process, unsure about how to structure our film. We debated different ways to end our documentary that afternoon, hoping to mine a climactic moment from the footage we had already taken. To our surprise, with less than an hour of natural sunlight remaining, TopNotch suggested that we set up our cameras in a cotton field nearby. Our tiny crew duly packed up our gear and headed to a hidden corner of Hopson Plantation in hopes that the plantation manager would not discover our presence. Top stood twenty feet into the field as our two cameras began to roll, paused, and then launched into a breathtaking twelve-minute improvised hip-hop performance centered on themes of race, labor, spirituality and nature. By the time he finished, we had both sensed an audience far beyond those of us in the cotton field that day.

[spoken]

Cotton field.

In my past life, in my ancestors life, this is all they had right here. They had one another, they had love. And the reason why I just had to bring you out to the cotton field simply because: in order for me to know where I'm going, I must know where I come from. It's the cotton field. So now the world, I want y'all to listen and listen right. This is what we used to do when we was in the cotton field.

So if y'all watchin', y'all bow y'all heads for me.

Heavenly father, I'm glad that you showed us a better way from the days of the past but it seems that with our mindset, we're gonna head back right there. I hope you lead us in the way whereas the righteousness is always gonna triumph over evil. It's possible. Let them know that, you know, that Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, just to name a few, didn't have to go through what they went through just to see that our lives not to be free. That, you know, we can hold hands with many hands of America. Blacks, whites, Asians, Chinese, all colors of God's spectrum. And Lord, we can only do this through, you know what I'm sayin', in your son Jesus Christ's name. So with that in mind, I pray now and forever more. Amen.

Cotton choppin'.

As the wind blows in Monday's mornings
Sunday nights 'n getting ready for early Monday mornings
Seein' me ridin' on the trucks in early mornings
Back in the days up when the cotton got (m) chopped by them hoes
All perspective
Never worried about bein' a ho
Just the difference between me and (m) bein' on my toes
Got whips and chains
And I know they got bars in backs
And they still got a part of that
They like scarred I see
Bloody tears
Many through years sufferin'
Knowin' that they cryin' many tears and they up
And never place the stuff
I know they gave this up
Just to only make it to church
Let me give (m) you a hymn
Where they speak it
I know troubles of the world
They will never long to see it
It will be done

Let me cry these awful tears
From the mornin' sun
And I'm a raise this above until my days are done

I cry tears 'cause I know
Blood shed and bloody red
Thoughts of man, people and
My ancestors dead here
They got grace and pick'm'more
I never seen pick up trees
But they burnin' with me

Best believe they gon' live through me
Cause I can bring 'em back to my memories
I cried tears you best uh believe
Thatta I would love to fight for here
I got my right through here
I put my stripes through here
I even do two years of my life for this here
Cause I did two years of my life here
Grabbin' my same hoe
Walkin' down the line
Seein' Johnson grass and oh, baby it's mine
Milkweeds they were growin'
No cotton for certain
But now I have to go and close the curtain

Now as the night fall
It creeps down into
Now that we walkin' right down dead in the center
Now we used to make 28 dollars in the day
Now let me take you back before the days
When there were just some nickel and some quarters
Knowin' that good and well
It couldn't support families and daughters
I know, understand, it taught us
They didn't want to see us read and write
but that's okay we gon' read
and I'm gonna tell you what life was like'
hard streetin'
I'm thinkin' that it's all completed
I don't wanna see my sentence not completed
I add a period to the life that I live and be
You wanna feel the cotton choppin' through me

It's more than T-O-P it's more than whatever you cry
It's gon' be whatever these tears that up in my eyes
I had too many f'ckin' family members that dead and died
Try pressin' through knowing that they been crucified
Livin' my life
I live this life sworn of the sword they never like see me
So now I got to bring you some more
Giving me more I give you my strength every day
It just lookin' up into the sky and the lord I pray
Just hopin' that you live your life through my babies
Cryin' me baby maybe
Isn't and maybes

Now I see uncle and uh uncle Jed
Seein' these people and they lookin'

All over their head
Nappy head and they seeing some roots
Stanky still getting booted
But they gettin' burned by the sweat it's pollutin'
And I know they came up with solutions
But just the fact that they didn't have the means or the materials to do it
Some of em
They tried to break free
And only thing they saw
Was a foot cut off like Baby 'T
Now you wanna look for Kunta Kinte
I got words that'll make you say like
Ooh, it won't be okay
I don't spread my butter with no Parkay
It's all day when I say they all grey
You won't wanna see the real truth?
I got your real truth
Aunt Jemima
Sally Sue
Now Joseph let me speak my life you HOVA

You wanna take me out now that I know-uh that it's over
My troubles of the world it will be done
I know this a challenge and my challenge down to one
Because we done made from the ways of the holocaust
Shed no tears
I'm a shed through years
Man careers done tried and crucified and lies
ain't gonna see it
But they gonna see this up in my eyes
I bring pain
I know that there's trouble with this game
But I just don't see a damn thing's gonna change
I make it my business just to talk about livin' for witness
This gonna be my choppin' cotton
Forever for livin' this
I feel this
And you gon' see it through my eyes it's gonna bleed
Don't ever worry 'bout what you see
I know my little ABCs
If it's backwards then I give you WXY and Z
Like Y are you Z' in on me?
Better get your Z's up because I think they need what?
Everybody in the world gonna need Jesus
But I'm givin' you a false pretendin'
Ain't gonna worry 'bout you sinnin'
I'm gonna worry about the beginnin' words you endin'
I'm lookin' for your fold cause you're not my friend

Understand that this game can end
It's like money and dreams back
I believe it's goin' to spend
You cannot say that
Tellin' me the loss from the gravy
It's so thoughts are crazy
I had to pray just to make me make it
And I believe it's the chance I take
Cotton choppin' exclusively for baby it's gonna be okay
I've given you my church hymn
and this is my cry
this is my cry
this is my cry
But it's not over people
It's not over
This is a song that I just have to take you to
Y'all know what I'm sayin'
I gotta take you to church with me
Gotta take you to church with me
You know I'm sayin'

It's like songs like those
I got in my head I still got in my head
I'm a put it to your head
I hope that you like it, you know what I'm sayin'
It goes like this:

[sung]
I know I am a child of God
I know I am a child of God

[spoken]
I end it right there
Can't give you too much more
Can't give you too much more
Then you might think I can sing
I'm just a rapper
I just know about life
I know about my life
I know where I came from
And as it so happens,
This was our place and home right here
Know what I'm sayin'
When the upper class members were eatin' steak
And all the good fine foods
They gave us the little fatback
They gave us the hog maws
They gave us some chopped up greens

And guess what?
We made it a blessing anyway.
It's called soul food today
But I just call it somethin' that we used to live
And survive off for everyday

Now.

Really, you heard the truth from me, you heard the cotton field, you done heard the cotton chopper. You done heard Mississippi.

Don't never, and I mean, don't you ever believe that Mississippi is all about the blues.

This Mississippi right here.

It's air, it's fresh, it's divine, it's all me. The truth. It's the truth.

This is where a whole lot of blood, a whole lot of tears, and a whole lot of memory will always stay in these cotton fields.

I guarantee you won't see nobody walking through these in the night.

I guarantee it. Guarantee it.

Let the world listen right.

Just let 'em listen right.

All my ancestors get up, y'all can walk through me.

You can walk through me.

So I walk through the valley of death

So I fear no man and no evil.

You can walk with me.

Sojourner Truth, you can walk with me.

Harriet Tubman, you can walk with me.

Kunta Kente, you can walk with me.

Martin Luther King, you can walk with me.

Malcolm X, you can walk with me.

All my peoples you can walk with me.

All my indentured servants, you can walk with me.

All my brothers and sisters, you can walk with me.

For everybody that just believe they went through some hardship and some hard times

You can walk with me

We gonna walk this together

This is my dream

This is my brother's dream

He want to see us hold hands, man woman and child, breathe through the life of the ways of the man.

You're only a murderer if you don't feed knowledge to the person that's comin' behind you. It's a generation. You can't never short them out in their malnourishment. It's knowledge for their brain and their soul.

It gives them a reality, it gives them a to chance to think and give them a chance to believe. It gives them a chance to move on when things is just not right.

Like I said, you can walk with me. You can walk with me.

Everybody come out the field,
The breeze is over.
They'll listen right through me
They'll listen right through me.
They'll listen right through me.
Now listen.⁴

⁴ Video recording, Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams, Clarksdale, Mississippi, July 25th, 2006

Appendix A

Transcript of Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams’ freestyle rap performance taken during lunch break as part of an interview. Clarksdale, MS. September 3rd, 2005.

TopNotch:

Local boy,
Stayin’ poster boy
All about the grain
Never worried about some change
Unless I’m a get some a change

Made my chance
Did my thing
Like I did my homework
But it wasn’t from the school
But it was from Delta streets I worked

Everything could end my life
And disrespect be put in dirt
Did my hand and shake my hand

Shake my hand
and give the Lord
All the blessing all the praise
But it was my hand they raise

When they saw the title one
Knowing that the title son
Giving me the whole city
Giving me the lock down
Really just to shock you
If you thought about it top down

TopNotch
Hold the bill
Hold the grain
Hold the steel
Hold the mayo
Hold your meal
Hold the flow
Hold your feels

This is back
Through some years
Through some time
Measure points

Making sure
Everybody feelin' they relate to joints
Pulled the cross
Did some thought
Did some thinking
Did some training
Did forever
Then came to bubble out you cranium
Still you're drainin' em
With some long type of loop
Everything the Delta said

They had to be fluid, but the
Difference between smart and the
Difference between stupid
It's a fine line and everybody had to go through it
Believe this
When the people come to the hood they receive this
And make sure that nothin' ends your life
but what's prestigious
Achieving it
Thinking that all the thing's the same

Make hood for the love but
Love brings pain
But it's overjoy
Speakin' from the choirboy himself
And I know that there was time when everybody needed help

Look at wealth
Wealth brought us back to a broke situation
Everybody thought they couldn't have it
Thought they couldn't make it
And there's some feelings from inside
I know I had to take it

It came about pacin'
Then my heart started racin'
It came about the teacher
and then it ran it away
And then it took another place
And thought it was to stay

Who's to say my thoughts came from a glass of Kool-Aid
Drunk it up and when I'm sittin' back up in the shade
Summertime for summer rhymes
that I can just spit
For same rhymes the same minds

That make my boys quit

Put that up on your life
And make sure your right time tick
Cause this is TopNotch
And you done heard the lyricist
From a boy
That came from Clarksdale
And made it hard here and
it's hardly felt, thinkin'
that it's hardly the
Air that makes everybody breathe
and then conceive of good feelings
But then again put it back up on your bicycle wheelin's
Took it down from priceless killings
And it's killing your soul

And now I see the cats here
They all out of control
Now let me grab hold of respect
And then put it to paper
But I call collect for fear that
Life is spectacular
Words from the Dracula but don't have them fangs
The only things that I have
Is my pain

So I spit this
From the outside of my heart
To the inside of my lungs
And that the last breath that I spit it
You will hear this song

And every words that I'm copywritin'
they will receive
That it's the knowledge, top dog
From your boy, T.O.P.

Appendix B

Transcript of Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams’ freestyle rap performance taken during lunch break as part of an interview. Clarksdale, MS. September 3rd, 2005

TopNotch:

Came of the life with the frozen hand
Steppin’ up for my chosen man
And I think that the people want to talk about
They been rich like they been a frozen man

Hit ‘em up on your beat
My block or on your street
Thinkin’ that they it’s your but
But I put it on your block
Makin’ sure that the boys be
Chewin’ no bubble gum
Kinda whipporwhill
Found it like a Bubbaliciousness

Thinkin’ they talkin’ this
I ain’t walkin’ this
I ain’t sparkin’ this
All lyin’ up in there talkin’ quits

Do your thing
And never did the work
And put it dead on your block
Like your made to jerk
When the girls in the club mention wearin’ a skirt
And g-strings like wanna back it up
Makin’ sure that the people want to track it up
And I know then that they lack enough
But I know that they gotta keepin’ their practice up
It’s all been good and up in the hood
And understand they’re ripe and they’re understood
And I’m knowin’ that I’m understandin’
Cause this is the life that I live, my man,
Hit ‘em up when we can
Got ‘em thinking
Gotta make it like a ram
Make it like a flip
Ready just to rip and just now thinkin’ they’re in deep water
Ready just to get it off your back like a little bit
Like smokin’ like a cigarette
Now they’re keepin’ it all up on [intelligible]

But then again they like ready to speak a battle
Ain't speakin' about it no way
But they behave
They sit in the shade
Drink Kool-Aid when it's summertime
And everybody wants to get some of mine
But I'm not like givin' up some of mine
It's some of the time and you can talk
To everybody can make you walk

I can make you big
And I can make you see
But then again I can help
You like real quick
Now who's the hand
You're shakin' the hand
Right here in the fellowship
Face the Lord
Left handstand not a left hand man
Still demanding the [Intelligible]

All the ills,
All the chills
And all the pains from all the years
I can put that like in all the fears
I know you done heard it from
The rap right here
T.O.P TopNotch the Vill
I love the Vill but
love the Top
Put it on T.O.P and make sure
That the whole block know about TopNotch

Now come on back let's hit the track
I love the floor but I hate the jack
I'm a mess it up, and I'll test it up,
But I never, never like test that black

True dat.

Appendix C

Transcript of Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams’ freestyle rap performance in the
Dear living room. Clarksdale, MS. October 10th, 2005.

TopNotch:

Look here, your boy got this one now
You know what I’m sayin’
It’s TopNotch
I’d like to thank all y’all for coming out to see me this evening
To see my All-Stars
Yes, sir
Ridin’ slow with this one, you know what I’m sayin’
I pledge allegiance not to the flag
But the flag of the human race born in the hearts of the struggle
This is love

Thuggin’ now
feelin’ like the block’s been movin’
Like I say it’s how the
life I was used to

Man it was nothin’ but
three streets and two side views
Like it was South View
But I gave it back and hit it on the Bayou

Cannon used to pick us up
Ride us on the trucks
And took us to cotton fields
So we could make a couple bucks

Believe this or not
but when we fill up that rushin’
Wasn’t no trees up
but just the sun hittin’ and brushin’

Long pants with them long shirts
Hangin’ with towels
Wipin’ sweat up from my face
And wipin’ it from my eyebrows

Lookin’ at the cotton
Didn’t feel that breeze
But up in the tiny little chapel
We could get that peace

Look-a here, man
I think I was about 13
Just to hit it back
And keep us on that monetary scheme

Ain't gonna worry about dreams
Cause my dreams don't light
But that hustle from that day
Gave me hustle by night

And it's my stripes
I feel like I know that's love
Matter of fact, I give it back,
Super seatback love

Man the people I know then
Is what I don't know now
But I'm glad I stick
with my people sure how

But it's all love
Cause we came back grindin'
There ain't nothin here
Just a second nick of timin'

But there have been some things
Some things that may be bad
Got a little big
Now my ass is fat

Put a gat up on your block
And make sure it's packed
And I gave 'em TopNotch
And I get TopNotch back

'Cause I didn't want matter-of-fact
Didn't have to flaunt it
Cause if they taught me that
I'm only headin' [intelligible]

Passin' me a bone to myself
Own to myself
Matter of fact stay lonely to myself

A couple of upper cuts
Are makin' me paranoid
I flip the grain and make the change
And show them boys can be boys

It's the heart of the ten
Matter of fact with the heart
With it then
I gave it all up

So I gave my heart to the man
And if I drink then I drink for my sane
But this is how the way
It's how the life began

It began for the ready or not
Keepin' that up on the high
And if they ready for block
I ain't worried 'bout 'em talkin

But then again they lookin' at me and
'They still stalkin'
But then again I got the streets talkin'

Man I'm lookin' at the
Sign there says, "S.T.O.P."
Ain't stoppin' me
Show me on the beat

And you can want it
Matter of fact they keep it on the street
Like I stir up the sympathy
Word from the beat

And that color might be red
but I keep it Tarheel
My boys, dogs grinnin'
Just to show my ad-lib

My elbows be ashy
And my shoes at my knees
But that's all right
I still spray a tune out my cheeks

To the O and to the P
Cause the God at first
Never been a Jehova
But I dare seen it over

Cause my witness is business
Hit it up on like a potato
Cause then they callin' me

The captain was a lieutenant

Man they all just salutin'
Came and took what we doin'
Just to show you this title for
The price of the music

This is all been in love
And I been exposed
Just to took it to the camera show
and then I can blow

Hit 'em up on one more time
and show them my ten toes
'Cause I came from the house
of the 904

Apartment--
about 17 or 18 people
One meal just to serve around
And they call that equal

Matter of fact so many sick days
Came like the sick ways
Showin' like the boss
When they caught me by some trick ways

That's all right
'cause it got me key paid
This is why I love it
I love what I made

I know I came from the struggle
Came from the Bottom
So when I came back here
I never will forgot

I then came back
But I didn't hear the need
So I had to show the people
This was up my sleeve

Hit it up one more time
And watch me bleed
Cause they want to see me
process and proceed

Ain't worried 'bout the greed

'cause this is my life
Just like Jeezy said
Man I give up my strife

Ain't worried 'bout the time
The tickin' be tickin'
Ain't worried 'bout them boys
'cause them boys be missin'

See 'em fishin' in the river
Just deliver their thought
just to show you who it is
TopNotch the Boss

Appendix D

Transcript of Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams’ freestyle rap performance in the course of documentary filming in a cotton field. Clarksdale, MS. July 26th, 2006.

TopNotch:

[spoken]

Cotton field.

In my past life, in my ancestors life, this is all they had right here. They had one another, they had love. And the reason why I just had to bring you out to the cotton field simply because: in order for me to know where I’m going, I must know where I come from. It’s the cotton field. So now the world, I want y’all to listen and listen right. This is what we used to do when we was in the cotton field.

So if y’all watchin’, y’all bow y’all heads for me.

Heavenly father, I’m glad that you showed us a better way from the days of the past but it seems that with our mindset, we’re gonna head back right there. I hope you lead us in the way whereas the righteousness is always gonna triumph over evil. It’s possible. Let them know that, you know, that Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, just to name a few, didn’t have to go through what they went through just to see that our lives not to be free. That, you know, we can hold hands with many hands of America. Blacks, whites, Asians, Chinese, all colors of God’s spectrum. And Lord, we can only do this through, you know what I’m sayin’, in your son Jesus Christ’s name. So with that in mind, I pray now and forever more. Amen.

Cotton choppin’.

As the wind blow s in Monday’s mornings
Sunday nights ‘n getting ready for early Monday mornings
Seein’ me ridin’ on the trucks in early mornings
Back in the days up when the cotton got (m) chopped by them hoes
All perspective
Never worried about bein’ a ho
Just the difference between me and (m) bein’ on my toes
Got whips and chains
And I know they got bars in backs
And they still got a part of that
They like scarred I see
Bloody tears
Many through years sufferin’
Knowin’ that they cryin’ many tears and they up
And never place the stuff

I know they gave this up
Just to only make it to church
Let me give (m) you a hymn
Where they speak it
I know troubles of the world
They will never long to see it
It will be done

Let me cry these awful tears
From the mornin' sun
And I'm a raise this above until my days are done

I cry tears 'cause I know
Blood shed and bloody red
Thoughts of man, people and
My ancestors dead here
They got grace and pick'm'more
I never seen pick up trees
But they burnin' with me
Best believe they gon' live through me
Cause I can bring 'em back to my memories
I cried tears you best uh believe
Thatta I would love to fight for here
I got my right through here
I put my stripes through here
I even do two years of my life for this here
Cause I did two years of my life here
Grabbin' my same hoe
Walkin' down the line
Seein' Johnson grass and oh, baby it's mine
Milkweeds they were growin'
No cotton for certain
But now I have to go and close the curtain

Now as the night fall
It creeps down into
Now that we walkin' right down dead in the center
Now we used to make 28 dollars in the day
Now let me take you back before the days
When there were just some nickel and some quarters
Knowin' that good and well
It couldn't support families and daughters
I know, understand, it taught us
They didn't want to see us read and write
but that's okay we gon' read
and I'm gonna tell you what life was like'
hard streetin'
I'm thinkin' that it's all completed

I don't wanna see my sentence not completed
I add a period to the life that I live and be
You wanna feel the cotton choppin' through me

It's more than T-O-P it's more than whatever you cry
It's gon' be whatever these tears that up in my eyes
I had too many fckin' family members that dead and died
Try pressin' through knowing that they been crucified
Livin' my life
I live this life sworn of the sword they never like see me
So now I got to bring you some more
Giving me more I give you my strength every day
It just lookin' up into the sky and the lord I pray
Just hopin' that you live your life through my babies
Cryin' me baby maybe
Isn't and maybes

Now I see uncle and uh uncle Jed
Seein' these people and they lookin'
All over their head
Nappy head and they seeing some roots
Stanky still getting booted
But they gettin' burned by the sweat it's pollutin'
And I know they came up with solutions
But just the fact that they didn't have the means or the materials to do it
Some of em
They tried to break free
And only thing they saw
Was a foot cut off like Baby T
Now you wanna look for Kunta Kinte
I got words that'll make you say like
Ooh, it won't be okay
I don't spread my butter with no Parkay
It's all day when I say they all grey
You won't wanna see the real truth?
I got your real truth
Aunt Jemima
Sally Sue
Now Joseph let me speak my life you HOVA

You wanna take me out now that I know-uh that it's over
My troubles of the world it will be done
I know this a challenge and my challenge down to one
Because we done made from the ways of the holocaust
Shed no tears
I'm a shed through years
Man careers done tried and crucified and lies
ain't gonna see it

But they gonna see this up in my eyes
I bring pain
I know that there's trouble with this game
But I just don't see a damn thing's gonna change
I make it my business just to talk about livin' for witness
'This gonna be my choppin' cotton
Forever for livin' this
I feel this
And you gon' see it through my eyes it's gonna bleed
Don't ever worry 'bout what you see
I know my little ABCs
If it's backwards then I give you WXY and Z
Like Y are you Z' in on me?
Better get your Z's up because I think they need what?
Everybody in the world gonna need Jesus
But I'm givin' you a false pretendin'
Ain't gonna worry 'bout you sinnin'
I'm gonna worry about the beginnin' words you endin'
I'm lookin' for your fold cause you're not my friend
Understand that this game can end
It's like money and dreams back
I believe it's goin' to spend
You cannot say that
'Tellin' me the loss from the gravy
It's so thoughts are crazy
I had to pray just to make me make it
And I believe it's the chance I take
Cotton choppin' exclusively for baby it's gonna be okay
'I've given you my church hymn
and this is my cry
this is my cry
this is my cry
But it's not over people
It's not over
This is a song that I just have to take you to
Y'all know what I'm sayin'
I gotta take you to church with me
Gotta take you to church with me
You know I'm sayin'

It's like songs like those
I got in my head I still got in my head
I'm a put it to your head
I hope that you like it, you know what I'm sayin'
It goes like this:

[sung]
I know I am a child of God

I know I am a child of God

[spoken]

I end it right there

Can't give you too much more

Can't give you too much more

Then you might think I can sing

I'm just a rapper

I just know about life

I know about my life

I know where I came from

And as it so happens,

This was our place and home right here

Know what I'm sayin'

When the upper class members were eatin' steak

And all the good fine foods

They gave us the little fatback

They gave us the hog maws

They gave us some chopped up greens

And guess what?

We made it a blessing anyway.

It's called soul food today

But I just call it somethin' that we used to live

And survive off for everyday

Now.

Really, you heard the truth from me, you heard the cotton field, you done heard the cotton chopper. You done heard Mississippi.

Don't never, and I mean, don't you ever believe that Mississippi is all about the blues.

This Mississippi right here.

It's air, it's fresh, it's divine, it's all me. The truth. It's the truth.

This is where a whole lot of blood, a whole lot of tears, and a whole lot of memory will always stay in these cotton fields.

I guarantee you won't see nobody walking through these in the night.

I guarantee it. Guarantee it.

Let the world listen right.

Just let 'em listen right.

All my ancestors get up, y'all can walk through me.

You can walk through me.

So I walk through the valley of death

So I fear no man and no evil.

You can walk with me.

Sojourner Truth, you can walk with me.

Harriet Tubman, you can walk with me.

Kunta Kinte, you can walk with me.

Martin Luther King, you can walk with me.

Malcolm X, you can walk with me.

All my peoples you can walk with me.
All my indentured servants, you can walk with me.
All my brothers and sisters, you can walk with me.

For everybody that just believe they went through some hardship and some hard times

You can walk with me

We gonna walk this together

This is my dream

This is my brother's dream

He want to see us hold hands, man woman and child, breathe through the life of the ways of the man.

You're only a murderer if you don't feed knowledge to the person that's comin' behind you. It's a generation. You can't never short them out in their malnourishment. It's knowledge for their brain and their soul.

It gives them a reality, it gives them a to chance to think and give them a chance to believe. It gives them a chance to move on when things is just not right.

Like I said, you can walk with me. You can walk with me.

Everybody come out the field,

The breeze is over.

They'll listen right through me

They'll listen right through me.

They'll listen right through me.

Now listen.

Appendix E

Log of Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams’ responses to phone interview with Ali Colleen Neff. November 24th, 2006.

Look at the details: where I was, type of vibe, and where I was trying to take the viewer and the listener...pretty much giving the world outside of Mississippi what Mississippi means to me.

The words that I chose and the freestyle rap that I chose to use were what I felt like my ancestors before me wanted me to tap into. I feel like I’m an activist like Martin Luther King or Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and any other figure from Black history.

I was looking at it as an educator...I feel like I was an educator out in the field. The whole environment was right about it—the hot sun, bugs were biting, bugs were about to come into my eyes and things. The whole environment brought me right back to when I was chopping cotton when I chopped cotton for two years. So I can just imagine what the slaves went through.

I feel like I rapped to myself far as a freestyle rap that could be so intense like what y’all saw that particular day, but what people are watching and what they see in that particular rap or what have you, I knew that it was always in me. It was just that particular day and the way how I was feeling, I felt like I had to share that with people that were going to watch the documentary, because we want the world to listen and to listen right, you know.

I was talking to anyone who had a care in their heart just to listen. I was doing it for the people who were ahead of our time.

All the raps that I do, I take that same approach in the delivery and wanting people to listen to me, but it was what I was talking about that made that particular freestyle different from all other freestyles that people have been hearing about me. I still talk about the struggle, I still talk about trying to make it and knowing that you live under the same situations that you once did—I’m still talking about that in that manner. But now, the focus wasn’t all about me, you know, I was talking about the people that didn’t get a chance to fulfill that type of life just because.

I call it the gospel truth. I call it education, I call it something I felt that the world needs to know.

It’s because of the topic that I chose to freestyle about—to sum it up in a nutshell, it was a freestyle from slavery where they found ways to communicate with one another just to meet up at certain times just to learn how to read and write and pray to the Lord and sing and just have worship.

I felt like it was appropriate to do that particular rap in the cotton field because there was no other rap that I could have done or no other freestyle that I should have done. It’s

the respect that I have for the people that came before me and paved the way for me to be in his world.

It was my appreciation to them, just to let them know that I appreciate it, and the work that they went through.

I chose to end the film [in the cotton field] I saved the best for last, was my mindset. I had been talking about the problems of Mississippi today or what have you, and the problems with Mississippi today are bad, and I feel like they would be worse if we don't do anything about it, But I had to go back and take another look on the situation of Mississippi back in the past and they had it much worse than we have it now.

When I was rapping, I was in that zone, I felt like I had to tell it, you know, it was something that was in me that I felt that I couldn't hold another day. I appreciate the documentary for allowing me to do so. I couldn't hold back, I shouldn't hold back, and I feel like I didn't hold back. I felt like I had to let the world know, give us a chance and we can make the best of it. But if we don't take that chance, then we might be ready to fall off.

I don't know about a ritual, I would say a performance, but I would say that I said it like it is, and I had something that I had on my chest and I felt like it was my cry out to the world and I got it off. I got it off my chest. And after it was all said and done, I felt good about it.

Like I said, I think I was in that zone where I could have kept rapping until my lungs collapsed. When I was in that zone, I took myself out of the world and put myself into my own equation, and before I came back to the world that I'm living in now, I had to get everything that I want to say out of my equation. And pretty much that's what I did.

I was talking to my ancestors, my people. I was talking to me, I was talking to you. That particular day, I felt that I wasn't the only one rapping. God put the words into me. And I said what he wanted me to say. That particular freestyle was in a zone of its own. And once it reached that peak, it felt like it was time to relay that...

The fact that people can read many different types of viewpoints from it is what I'm saying I'm proud that that particular saying alone can do for a worldwide type of discussion.

Appendix F

Transcript of *Let the World Listen Right*, a documentary film by Ali Colleen Neff, Brian Graves and Jerome Williams. Available at www.folkstreams.net.

Let the World Listen Right

Directed by: Brian Graves, Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams and Ali Colleen Neff

Transcript and notes by folklorist Ali Colleen Neff

TopNotch: Basically like I said, it’s all about like a soul cry, or what have you, I’ll put it that way to sum it all up.

[V/O: TopNotch beatboxing] [Title: Let the World Listen Right]

[Beatboxing continues] [Close shot of Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams sitting on a couch]

My name is Jerome Williams. Pretty much I want you all to know me as TOP: TopNotch the Villain and I’m 27 years old, straight from Clarksdale, Mississippi: better known as the Delta.

[Shot of TopNotch beatboxing in his kitchen]

[Shots of TopNotch waking up, brushing his teeth, putting on his shoes]

TopNotch [V/O]: The way of life, you know, far as Clarksdale or just in the Delta period, you know what I’m sayin’, was brought up on, you know, gospel and blues or what have you. A good time, you know what I’m sayin’, was on the weekend everybody sittin’ outside drinkin beer, playin’ spades and dominoes and listenin’ to the blues. And then verses Sunday they all go to church to get their religion on.

[Shot of TopNotch beatboxing] [Beatboxing continues as V/O]

TopNotch: [V/O]: OK now. Of course, we a wave of generation where, you know, rap and hip-hop was like some pretty good sounds in our ear.

[V/O: sounds of beatboxing] [Shot of TopNotch’s hospital ID and TopNotch in white hospital uniform]

[TopNotch walks to car in hospital uniform, starts car]

[Traveling shot of New World District, Clarksdale]

TopNotch [V/O]: Pretty much what you see outside of me is what I call home. This is Clarks Vegas. You might know it as Clarksdale. But it’s our little Clarks Vegas, you know.

[Close up of TopNotch driving through Clarksdale]

TopNotch: It could be a city up on the rise, but however you know, we doin' some things now that we're pretty much hittin' just us up in our own foot.

[Traveling shot of Clarksdale's New World District]

TopNotch [V/O]: What they say, pretty much, what most raps are sayin' is that this is what they see and, you know, we actually in a sense if you listen to it, we actually tellin' that we are tired of this.

[Drives under trestle spray-painted with the word, "Clarksdale"]

[Shot of TopNotch driving as the sounds of his rapping fade up]

[Shot of TopNotch standing in front of a car in Clarksdale' Brickyard neighborhood. Small Tyme stands behind him]

TopNotch: And it's all good
And I keep it to the game
And it's all hood
And if you still want the same
I can change good
Cause if I gave it to the bad
I'm still TopNotch man, I'm still kickin' grass, man,
I'm all in this thing
I'm all in the game
I'm all in the hood never changin' up a thang
I help you feel good but I'm still bringin' pain
I show it to the streets cause the streets will never change
I'm rockin' me on raw beats
Knowin' that it's all me
Matter of fact I got a t-shirt to go and copy
Matter of fact I drop beat
If you wanna drop me,
I'm a give it all to the streets
I be about my issue (fades under)

TopNotch [V/O]: I just took one whole song or one instrumental beat by itself and I rap through the whole thing personally by myself. All if that's, you know, unscripted, you know, all of that was freestyle. Everything that you heard was straight off the dome.

[Close-up shot of TopNotch from couch interview]

TopNotch: I feel like my talent with words and how the way I can use my words, is like, is what just electrifies some of the people, or just motivates the people or what have you, you know what I'm sayin'?

[Shot of Top rapping in front of the car]

TopNotch: (fades in) ...real, homie, and it's all on the good.
I told you this is my neck of the woods, Clarks Vegas!

[Friends and neighbors jump and shout as TopNotch finishes his rhyme]

Neighbors: Dirty South, Dirty South!

Neighbor Woman #1: This is what we do!

Neighbor Man: Yeah!

Neighbor woman: Clarks Vegas baby, Clarks Vegas Baby!

Neighbor girl: Now somebody scream!

[Close up of TopNotch from couch interview]

TopNotch: It's not all about my worlds being serious, you know. Mines can be in the form of a joke, you know what I'm sayin'. I love to see people smile, to see people laugh see people have a good time and all that, you know?

[Shot of TopNotch rapping in his backyard with his 11-year old neighbors Derrick Jurden, Mario Haygen and Kevon Jurden]

Kevon Jurden: Now I be in my Grandma's house thinkin' 'bout good things
and I be up in the kitchen tryin' to cook me some pork and beans
I'm a rhyme
Listen if you don't like it you can go look from behind
And I'm a make my cash and you can look from the past
Like a blast from the past I'm gonna last.

TopNotch: And outlast the criminals
and outlast the snakes
keep your hearts in the real
and just don't deal with the fake
Grass for the lawn, baby,
Ain't gotta deal with the snakes
Just do whatever it takes just to make no mistakes.
Set 'em free.

Kevon Jurden: I'm a set 'em free and let 'em know what I came for
And if you don't like it you can go in the house door...[fades out]

[Shot of TopNotch on couch]

TopNotch: I been rappin' for quite some time now. About five years old. So that's a lot of years down there.

[Shot of TopNotch and his cousin, Taurus Metcalf, on a bench in TopNotch's backyard]

[Sequence of TopNotch and his mother, Jeweline Williams, in her home in Lambert, Mississippi]

[Shots of a photo album with pictures of TopNotch as a child, photos of TopNotch's family on a wall]

TopNotch: This God-given talent, may be the case or what have you, your parents just wanna show you off—"Oh, he looks so cute, Oh, he's so cute. Won't you do this for me, baby?" And you didn't really want to do it, you know what I'm sayin', but you can't tell you momma "no" or she gonna whoop you or something, you know what I'm sayin'.

[Shot of TopNotch and Miss Williams on her couch]

Jeweline Williams: He could say all the commercials at a certain age. I remember he just be up in there doin' somethin' and he put it together and then he start sayin' his ABCs backward.

[Shot of TopNotch's album with a photocopied "Good Memory" award from his childhood]

TopNotch: Pretty much they say I had a good memory.

Jeweline Williams: Just like, he didn't know how to read and go in there, sit on the commode and put the book up like this here, bottom side up, I swear he readin'. And I'm like, come in there and ask him what in the world he doin', he'd say, "I'm readin'." Ask him what in the world it was: "Oh, I'm through now." He'd close the book and get down all nice and beautiful

TopNotch: And plus, I used to love reading all the time.

Jeweline Williams: The grades were good—it just was the hair. The hair. He didn't like combin' his hair.

TopNotch: (laughing) Movin' right along.

[Traveling shots of wet cotton fields in July]

[Music: Terry "Big T" Williams playing "Catfish Blues"]

TopNotch [On camera, sitting in interview chair]: Agriculture. (laughs) Agriculture a type of way of being. And you know, that was our way of life, you know what I'm sayin'? If you know about Mississippi, if you want to know about Mississippi, then I'm just sayin', read about cotton. You know what I'm sayin'? You'll get pretty much all your answers about Mississippi.

[Rolling shots of disheveled buildings and streets, historic train station, signs]

Damien Jurden [V/O]: I like almost everything. Only thing I don't like about Clarksdale is all this killin'. Killin' our family members. All this sensitive stuff goin' on all around here, we can't never do nothin'. If people keep killin', won't nobody never have no fun.

[Shots of kids playing]

Kevon Jurden [On camera]: I like mostly everything about Clarksdale. The food tastes good, [V/O: Shot of barbeque sign] the people down here know how to cook, [On camera] and just to tell the truth, I can't picture none of my family members in no casket.

[Shot of Big T playing the "Catfish Blues," a song that had been running over the previous footage.]

[Background music: "Catfish Blues"]

Terry "Big T" Williams [On camera: sitting with guitar in his living room]: I'm Big T, Terry Big T Williams, I'm from Clarksdale, Mississippi. [V/O: Shots of blues landmarks in Clarksdale] This town grew with the blues, or the blues greit up, one. I don't know how it happened. But now this town has become a tourist attraction year-round. And the music draws the attraction. [On Camera] If you come to Clarksdale looking for anything other than what we have to add or offer, you came to the wrong place.

[Shot of Big T playing "Catfish Blues"]

Big T [V/O: Shots of blues landmarks in Clarksdale]: When I was a kid growing up, blues was pagan. Parents say, "Oh, stop playin' that devil-worshippin' music in there, boy. Later that night, they left church and went to the juke joint, and they was dancin' to the same kind of music they told me to stop playin'.

[Background music: Big T plays "I Be's Troubled"]

[Shots of Clarksdale streets and tourist attractions]

Big T [On Camera]: I was raised on this kind of music, and I also heard in the background John Lee Hooker, Robert Johnson, Son House, Sonny Boy. You know, I can go on and on with the great guys, but when I met Frank Frost, Sam Carr and Big Jack, these guys showed me a whole different thing. They showed me love, they showed me understanding. They showed me...they gave me a piece of mind that I could always lean on.

[V/O: Shots of Big T playing guitar as the backing track fades up]

Big T: I tell a lot of guys that I meet that the music has never been about us anyway. It's all about what the music can do for us. It can make us feel one way, it can make us feel another way. It can calm us down when we need to be calmed down. So music is—this is what these old guys taught me.

[Shots of Super Soul Shop and fancy shoes and clothes]

Big T [V/O]: People say that the blues is dyin' down here. Well, every time they say that, every time it comes out of their mouth, it means the blues is still goin' on. It actually doesn't change. It's still the same. What they do is modify it. They take it to another level. [On Camera] Just like the rap. Rap came from one industry. It came from being clean rap to hardcore rap, to dirty rap to low-down, shootin' guns, or whatever, you know. Okay, blues did the same thing. You had a happy blues, you got a good-feeling blues, you got a back-in-the-alley, cutthroat kinda blues.

TopNotch [Sitting for interview]: How the way I'm doin' with my words is how the way he's doin' with his guitar. I mean, I feel like my words and how the way I'm placing 'em to where, you know, not only can they sound good, but just actually to make sense, you know, through logic is how the way he uses his guitar. It's the soul of a man, you know what I'm sayin', by just his finger and some strings, you know what I'm sayin'.

[Music: sounds of hip-hop beats fade up]

[Shots of TopNotch rapping in Keithan "K-Deezy" Dear's bedroom, writing rhymes as Deezy created beats on the computer]

[Shot of TopNotch rapping from written page]

TopNotch [Rapping]: Loyalty and respect is everything up in the field
Hustlin' and grindin' just to-uh make a meal
Took five kids out the life of reality
And hopin' that we can live life out our fantasy
Bills gotta be paid, clothes gotta be on our back,
Hustle gotta be made...

[Music stops] [Shot of Topnotch in car with newspaper in his hand]

TopNotch: I just received word that, um, my rap group, F.A.M., we on the front page of our local paper down here in Mississippi, the Clarksdale Press-Register. Now, to us, that's a very big thing. A very big thing. And you know what, I'm a do you all a favor. I'm a do you all a favor, I'm a show you a little clip right there. This is us right there. That's us right there. Can you see that? Can you see that? That's us right there. My man Small, K'Deezy. Yata, that's me TopNotch the Villain, and my boy Buggs Diego. Man, that's us right there. That's us right there. "Bridgin' the Gap from Blues to Rap," baby, that's it. Famous right there, that's all right. I told you, we keepin' the game T.O.P., baby.

[TopNotch approaches Kimyata "Yata" Dear on the front lawn of her parents' house]

TopNotch: (To Yata) We on the front page too, pimpin', we there too. "Rappin' for peace, baby. Hey, and that's...

[Yata looks at paper, silent]

Yata Dear [V/O]: My name is Kimyata Dear, I'm 17 years of age and I'm from Clarskdale, Mississippi.

[Shot of Yata sitting on her lawn]

Yata Dear: Jerome, Jerome, basically, I basically grew up with Jerome. He basically lived with us for a minute. I know him ever since I was young, so he like a brother.

[Shot of TopNotch approaching the Dear family front door with newspaper]

Yata Dear [V/O]: I started off listenin' to him so I'm like, I can rap.

[Shot of Yata sitting on her lawn]

Yata Dear [Rapping]: They say life is too short to live the same day twice.
So the money I made yesterday I gotta make it thrice.
Gotta do what I gotta do in certain situations of life.
"Cause [] has been defined as the joys of life.
But I have been through the fire and still I survive,
It's the pride that's inside that makes me rise.

[Shot of TopNotch and Timothy "Small Tyme" Williams rapping in Small Tyme's living room] [Music: TopNotch beatboxes along with the rhyme]

Small Tyme: If you a red panther, put your hands up, put your hands up.
Back then, you wasn't even TOP.
It was in the makin', you was just Jerome to me.
Back then, it was just little Tim, it wasn't Small Tyme, but that's new to them.

TopNotch: I remember we was in first period...

Small Tyme: My name is Timothy Williams, aka Small Tyme. I started rappin, well, I say entertaining, my second grade classroom, was my first time, me and TOP did a rhyme, freestyle, we wrote a rhyme our second grade.

[Shot of group rapping in living room continues]

Keithan "K-Deezy" Dear [V/O]: My name is Kethan Dear, K'Deezy.

[Shot of K-Deezy sitting on back lawn in chair]

K-Deezy: My brother Small Tyme and T.O.P., they been doin' their thing for a minute. They been doin' their thing for a long time, rhyming, [V/O: Shots of TopNotch and Small Tyme rapping in living room] I remember they used to get stuff together in school, and they used to put it together and have stuff to do in front of 'em, poems, they used to rhyme it out, they always been into it. And TOP, he really been on it since the beginning, since I can remember.

[Music: Sounds of K-Deezy's hip-hop beats fade up]

[Shots of Deezy and the group making music in Deezy's bedroom/studio]

K-Deezy [V/O]: My thought makin' beats, I don't try to make one particular type beat, if it's a different type, beat, I try to make it broad, I try to make different type of beats, all beats, you know, I wouldn't be stickin' to one page, when I say, K-Deezy do that, K-Deezy can do that. I can make any kind of beat, rock rap, all that. And I'm a computer freak, that's why I do all that type of stuff, anything I can do on the computer, I'm gonna try.

[Shots of Deezy recording in bedroom]

[Shot of Buggs Diego sitting in chair on the Williams' back lawn]

Anthony DeWayne "Buggs" Diego: When I hear one of K-Deezy's beats, I get the energy of, you know, [V/O: shots of computer running software and the group in the bedroom/studio] whether I should sing this or whether I should rap this, you know, but, as far as the spiritual energy goes, um, I feel sort of that same thing. When one of those beats is hot, I get the ebergery to say, ok, let me see what I can bring to it. My name is Buggs Diego. Well, real name is Anthony DeWayne Buggs. [V/O: Shots of Da F.A.M. rapping together in Williams living room] Sometimes I get the feeling that I need to sing a hook, or just straight up rap it. But I have a little singing influence in me, and so that comes from the church.

[Music: Group snapping, singing and rapping an improvised song about Clarksdale]

Buggs Diego: Clarks Vegas is the place
It's the place that we from,

Group Members: Clarks Vegas is.

Buggs Diego: And no matter what we do,
It's the place that we from.

[Traveling shots of old housing and crumbling neighborhoods of Clarksdale]

Yata Dear: [V/O] What's the hard thing about growing up in Clarksdale, really is tryin' to do something, tryin' to get jobs and stuff. [On Camera, in backyard] Clarksdale is small. [V/O: Shots of Clarksdale] And the town is so little, every little store around here full, staff's full, you know, so it's really kinda hard gettin' a job in Clarksdale.

[Music: rapping continues over pan shots of Clarksdale]

Yata Dear: [V/O] I can take a scene in Clarksdale that was like maybe a bad scene maybe a lot of stuff happened, maybe somebody got shot or whatever. And I can put that in a song to get people to, like you know, lower the crime rate or whatever. So that's how I use that.

[Shots of group rapping in living room]

TopNotch [rapping]: We a foster child, but we are all we got
Clarks Vegas is our spot, baby, it be hot.

[Close shot of Small Tyme sitting in his backyard]

Small Tyme: I always speakin' the truth about what we feel and how we feel things are goin' on. Especially with the economics in this town. [V/O: shots of poverty in Clarksdale] I mean, we need jobs, we need...we don't even have a YMCA in this town here, that's why so much crime goes on in this town here. I think a lot of outsiders don't get it. Don't listen to how the music sounds, listen to what we sayin'.

Small Tyme (rapping)[V/O]: From the blues, it was all good news,
I went to see Big Jack Johnson...

[Shots of group rapping in living room]

TopNotch [V/O]: You know, you can't change the whole place, you know what I'm sayin'. That's almost like sayin' things ludicrous. However, you know, pretty much get the people that's willing to listen, you know [V/O: Shots of Lan-Lan's barbershop and customers in downtown Clarksdale] People that just want to have some type of changes in life or whatnot. And then, you know, you work with that. And maybe then you go out and you get the people that you can reach and could be the people they can reach. And you know, it's a transforming experience. It's, you know, a domino effect thataway. [Pan camera: Shot from indoor interview] So, pretty much, it all starts from that one person just having the drive, have the idea, have the motivation to get something done, but just need just the manpower or the tools or the right essentials just to get that task completed.

[Shot of group rapping in living room]

Da F.A.M. (rapping/singing): Clarks Vegas is the place
It's the place where we from
And no matter what you do,
It's the place that we from (yeah)
Clarksdale is the place
It's the place that we from
And no matter what you do,
It's the place that we from (yeah)

[Shot of K-Deezy in outdoor interview] [Music continues in background]

K-Deezy: It's like a lot of covered-up racist stuff goin' on right now, not a lot of in-your-face type racist things.

[Shot of K-Deezy with group, rapping]

K-Deezy: It's a small town
With big city problems, lotta shit goin' down
Police can't solve them

Man, it's real bad
Shit really gully
And if you want to talk about it, shit real ugly

[Shots of kids playing, families together, souped-up cars, TopNotch and Buggs joking together]

K-Deezy [V/O]: But at the same time, we take that Clarks Vegas name and we just we make it as a fun place for us to get away from all that and everybody know everybody around here pretty much, so. At nighttime, it's a different town, it's Mississippi, but we got clubs we got bars, everybody got cars where they ride and have a little showcase, just like any other place. And we just let 'em all know with that name.

[Shot of group continuing to rap and sing about Clarks Vegas in living room]

Da F.A.M.: Clarks Vegas is the place, it's the place that we from
And no matter what we do, it's the place that we from. (music fades).

[Fade in church incantation music]

[Shots of Deacon and choir members singing incantation in First Oak Grove Church in Crowder, Mississippi]

Congregation (singing, slowly): I am a child of God. I am a child of God.

Deacon #1 (singing): I said I love the Lord.

[Shot of TopNotch in church pew singing to incantation]

Congregation (singing): I am a child of God.

TopNotch [V/O]: And I do believe that Jesus died for our sins or what have you. [On Camera: Indoor interview] He died on the cross and yes, he resurrected, you know, I believe in all of that.

[Shot of second Deacon, chanting the Our Father]

Deacon #2: ...heavenly father. And allow you to have your way with us. We sinners, have mercy on us. Don't let 'em be ashamed of the way that you are []. Don't let 'em be afraid...
[41]

TopNotch [V/O]: I mean, I don't stand on no pulpit and I don't have no Sunday service or what have you. [On camera: Indoor interview] But nevertheless, I still have, you know, I still have that artist, you know, that believe in what they believe in.

[Shot of First Oak Grove Pastor Reverend Allen Johnson preaching into a microphone]

Reverend Johnson: ...You gotta live and walk in the word. It doesn't matter what the drug addicts say. It doesn't matter what the pimps say. You gotta live in the word. Because the word will. Keep you....

TopNotch [V/O]: My Sunday morning is every single day when I choose to freestyle, or every single minute.

[Shot of Miss Martha Raybon leading the First Oak Grove choir] [Music: Choir singing "He's a Battleaxe"]

Choir: He's a battleaxe in the time of war
He's a battleaxe in the time of war
He's a battleaxe in the time of war
He's our shelter in the time of war

TopNotch [V/O]: I sung in the choir. You know, Miss Martha was backin' me up, makin' sure that everything was okay. You know, we got a good response, you know, and as they say down here in Mississippi, we had some church. [Close shot of TopNotch talking on camera] We had some church on Sunday.

[Shot of TopNotch sitting with Miss Martha Raybon in her modest, cozy home in Crowder, Mississippi. In some of these shots, her grandchildren sit on her lap]

TopNotch (To Miss Martha Raybon): Troubles of the world. That's my favorite of all time. There's rap, there's R and B, hip-hop, rock, whatever, but gospel...

Miss Martha Raybon: "Soon I will be Done?"

TopNotch: "Soon I will be Done."

Miss Martha Raybon (singing): Soon I will be done with the troubles of this world
Troubles of the world
Troubles of the world
Troubles of this world
Troubles of this world [V/O: Shots of Miss Martha worshipping in First Oak Grove Missionary Baptist Church]
Soon I will be done with the troubles of this world
I'm goin' home to live with God.
I'm goin' home to live with my God.

Miss Martha: [V/O shots of Miss Martha] My name is Martha Raybon, I am from Crowder Mississippi. I met Jerome at church. I was choir directing. When young ones come along and whoever wanted to be in the choir, then I would work with them. And, see, just like with Jerome, and the group that I had when he was there. They were eager, and they really wanted to learn, and we would get right in this little trailer. And I remember [V/O: shots of the church choir] they were so eager, they come every day wanting to have rehearsal. Whether they knew it or not, there were people on the outside listening to them. During that time. [45] [V/O: Shots of a Delta church at sunset, local streams and fields, etc.]

Back then, they would use songs just like, uh, “There’s Gonna be a Meeting at the Old Campground” letting the slaves know where they were gonna have a meeting that night for church.

“Wade in the Water” would tell them where to wade to to go to the Underground Railroad to escape slavery. So it was used them for a mode of communicating for them to tell where to go, where there would be a meeting for church. Because a lot of them, they were not allowed to have church, so they would have to slip and have church, and when they got ready to go away to freedom, they would have to know which direction to meet up at. So those songs would pass, or as they say, “start in one cotton field and run across to the other one” so that everybody would know where to go, where to meet up at.

[On camera with grandchildren] When the Holy Spirit take over, ooh, you have...you’re just out of control. You don’t know... you know, ooh. The singin’. And a lot of people will tell you, the power that go with you singin’ that song. And how it made them feel and how it makes you feel. [V/O: Shots of Miss Martha in church] It makes you feel, a lot of times, that’ll just make you forget all cares, all worries, all everything.

Miss Martha: [On camera](singing) There are mountains in my life
So hard to climb
But I promise
I’ll keep climbin’
If you’ll only... [Music continues under footage of Kimyata Dear speaking]

Kimyata Dear: [On camera, medium shot in her backyard] Like when you rappin’, you just let yourself, let yourself go. Same thing like people do in church. When you feel a song, you just let yourself go. And usually when you do that you rap better or sing better because you just rappin’ or you singin’ from your soul, which really just lift up everything, and it just comes out better result than not feeling your song and just rapping to be rappin’.

[V/O: Miss Martha’s singing continues]

Big T [Medium shot with his bass guitar on his lap]: Music can make me happy, music can make me sad, music can make me...wonder. You know. It’s all about the music and what it gives you back.

Kevon Jurden [Shot of Kevon and his two friends outside]: I wanna change the world and how people act and what they do, and like, if I make it, my raps ain’t gonna be about drugs and killin’. My raps gonna be about God, and what people need to start doin’ and what they need to stop doin’.

Miss Martha [On camera]: (singing) ...I am willing
Lord, to run home,
All, all the way [Shakes her head]

TopNotch: [On camera, extreme close-up] Now in my raps or what have you, how the way it transcends, or how the way I catch this Holy Spirit or what have you, is that I catch this, I

just keep rappin, and the more I start makin' sense and the more you begin to feel it, the more crunk, you know what I'm sayin', you get, you know what I'm sayin' or what have you.
[Sounds of TopNotch rapping fade up]

[Shot of TopNotch standing in a cotton field, rapping]

TopNotch:

But they burnin' with me
Best believe they gon' live through me
Cause I can bring 'em back to my memories
I cried tears you best uh believe
Thatta I would love to fight for here
I got my right through here
I put my stripes through here

Now let me take you back before the days
When there were just some nickel and some quarters
Knowin' that good and well
It couldn't support families and daughters
I know, understand, it taught us
They didn't want to see us read and write
but that's okay we gon' read
and I'm gonna tell you what life was like'
hard streetin'
I'm thinkin' that it's all completed
I don't wanna see my sentence not completed
I add a period to the life that I live and be
You wanna feel the cotton choppin' through me

It's more than T-O-P it's more than whatever you cry
It's gon' be whatever these tears that up in my eyes
I had too many f'ckin' family members that dead and died
Try pressin' through knowing that they been crucified
Livin' my life
I live this life sworn of the sword they never like see me
So now I got to bring you some more
Giving me more I give you my strength every day
It just lookin up into the sky and the lord I pray
Just hopin' that you live your life through my babies
Cryin' me baby maybe
Isn't and maybes

[Closer shot of TopNotch in the same scene] Now I see uncle and uh uncle Jed
Seein' these people and they lookin'
All over their head
Nappy head and they seeing some roots
Stanky still getting booted
But they gettin' burned by the sweat it's pollutin'

And I know they came up with solutions
But just the fact that they didn't have the means or the materials to do it
Some of em
They tried to break free
And only thing they saw
Was a foot cut off like Baby T
Now you wanna look for Kunta Kinte
I got words that'll make you say like
Ooh, it won't be okay
I don't spread my butter with no Parkay
It's all day when I say they all grey
You won't wanna see the real truth?
I got your real truth
Aunt Jemima
Sally Sue
Now Joseph let me speak my life you HOVA
You wanna take me out now that I know-uh that it's over
My troubles of the world it will be done....(fades out)

TopNotch [On Camera in interview]: The more live, the more, you know the energy start a-flowin', and it's like, for me it comes like from my toes and it goes into my feet and it goes like to my ankles, and it goes to my shin to my calf to my knees to my thighs to my hips to my waist belly to my heart to my chest to my throat to my brain. And then once it gets to the point where you can't hold it in your body no more, it just all comes out in one big ol' blur and it's just beautiful music.

[Fade to black] [Credits flash]

[Sound: First Oak Congregation singing incantation]

[Fade into pan of cotton field at sunset]

[Credits]

Directed by:
Brian Graves
Ali Colleen Neff
Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams

Based on Ethnography by:
Ali Colleen Neff

Director of Photography:
Brian Graves

In Order of Appearance:

Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams

Friends and neighbors in the Brickyard

Derrick Jurden
Mario Haygen
Kevon Jurden

Taurus Metcalf

Jeweline Williams

Terry “Big T” Williams

Mr. Tater the Music Maker

Keithan “K-Deezy” Dear
Timothy “Small Tyme” Williams
Kimyata “Yata” Dear
Anthony “Buggs Diego” Buggs, Jr.

The Staff and customers of Lan-Lan’s Barbershop

Blunt, Vanessa and their Dad
Bobbi Collins

The Congregation of First Oak Grove Missionary Baptist Church
Reverend Allen Johnson
Martha Raybon

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DA F.A.M.

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Appendix G

Log of Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams’ interview with Ali Colleen Neff. 0 Blues Alley, Clarksdale, MS. Saturday, September 3rd, 2005, 3:00 p.m.

Comments: Conducted during TopNotch’s lunch break as an orderly at the local hospital. I had met TopNotch before and taped him doing some freestyle at a juke joint in Leland, Mississippi. At that time, he expressed interest in taking part in my study of rural, southern hip-hop. After a few phone conversations, he agreed to an interview. We talked about his influences, his feelings about his community, his history as an artist, and where his flow comes from. I did the questioning as Tim Gordon, my partner, took video.

AN: What’s your real name—your full name?

TOP: My real name is Jerome Williams.

AN: And where were you born and when?

TOP: I was born right here in Clarksdale, Mississippi. 1979.

AN: What name do you go by when you’re performing?

TOP: I go by the name TopNotch the Villain, but it’s short for T.O.P, or just TopNotch the Vill, but TopNotch the villain is my whole rap name.

AN: Where did you get that from?

TOP: I had just recently just gotten out of the military. I was in Fort Rucker, Alabama, and the name was actually just came into my head. I entered this freestyle contest, a local contest in Alabama, which I won, and they asked me what my name was, and I just came up with TopNotch, and the rest is history.

AN: How did you get involved in freestyle?

TOP: I went to the block party in Fort Rucker and I knew that I was good at rapping. I wanted people to hear what I had to say—my kind of common sense. I also knew that I could rhyme better than most of the people in the competition.

AN: And when was that?

TOP: 2001.

AN: And when did you join the military?

TOP: I joined the military couple of months after my high-school graduation, in 1997.

AN: When did you first start freestyling?

TOP: I remember starting to freestyle when I was 5 years old. My mom and my aunties thought it was something neat then. Music has always been a big influence my life, and I put the pieces together and just kept going and going with it and here I am twenty-some years later.

AN: If you were five when you first started freestyling, that would have been 1984. Had you ever heard hip-hop before that?

TOP: The first rapper I ever saw on t.v. was LL Cool J, with his song *I'm Bad*. I had also heard Run-DMC and other rap songs, but *I'm Bad* sticks out in my memory. I can't explain what it was, but I was drawn to the music.

AN: What channel did you see that on, was it MTV?

TOP: Actually, it was on BET, channel 31. As life goes on, more music has started to influence me. The military opened my mind to a greater variety of music. Now I take all of the music I've heard and combine it in my work.

AN: When you were in the military, did you have an easier time getting a hold of music—cassettes or cds?

TOP: That's when I really started to collect cassettes and cds. I'd hear songs about men and women relating, and other music that just captured my heart. It was just something inspirational.

AN: What kind of music were you inspired by as a child?

TOP: Oh, well, you know, you have Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie and other commercial artists. And then there was the blues in Clarksdale when I was growing up. It was very popular back then. Every Saturday morning, you know, you would see people outside in the community, just drinking beer, smoking, and that's how I got introduced to the blues. Music's been around me all my life, so I feel like it's a no-brainer to get in this.

AN: Did you ever get involved with the church?

TOP: Yes, I did, actually I'm a member of first Oak Grove, and I met a lot of great people there from all over. I just want to say on the record that I thank each and every one for it, I can't mention you all right now, you know who you all are.

AN: Was there anyone in your family that you remember making music or rhyming?

TOP: Collectively, I really just don't recall anyone makin' music. I had family members writing poems. We all had our time, I think everybody have a time when we sing in the shower, but I want to share my message with people. I just want to let the people hear what real rap is. It's not about who you are or where you're from, it's about expressing what's in your heart. It's about reaching out and inspiring other people.

A rape victim might need another voice to be heard to let them know life can be okay. Or maybe a kid is getting picked on. The voice on the tape can be their big brother. That's another reason why my talent should be shared with others. I would love to have people everywhere hear my rhymes.

AN: Who are some of the rappers that influence you now?

TOP: I'm a Nas fan, his lyrics are great I listen to Motivational rappers like DMX, and a whole lot of southern rappers: Geto Boys, Outkast, 8-Ball, MJG, and more.

AN: What do you think of the difference between southern hip-hop and northern hip-hop?

TOP: I don't think they are that different. In the South, we talk about our cars, our clothes and our lifestyles, but it's because we've been poor for so long. We want to show that we can have those things too. We want to feel respected by African Americans in other parts of the country.

AN: Back to your influences, did you ever hear anyone in your community doing the dozens or doing any toasts?

TOP: Yes—the dozens were for entertainment, but we knew that playin' was playin' and that we shouldn't cross the line between joke and reality.

AN: Did you ever play the dozens when you were a kid?

TOP: I did, but I didn't mean it back then.

AN: Did you ever hear any rhymes like the signifyin' monkey, or Shine?

TOP: I did hear those things, but I think of myself like Marvin Gaye: I built on the past to start something new—like the blues in this area. Rap was a new thing when I was growing up.

Some of the older generation of musicians in the Delta talk about how there's nothing new about rap. But I think we're building on what they had, not taking from them. They also say that our music is too explicit, but music was all about lovemaking back then. It's true that lyrics can get too explicit, so who's to say that the older people are wrong.

Sometimes it's like we're they're children and they have to keep us in check.

AN: I think you've mentioned to me before that you try to be careful in the words that you use.

TOP: That's another thing. If it's something your mother wouldn't approve of or my mother wouldn't approve, I try not to say it. However, I do try to get my voice across.

AN: Did you ever sing?

TOP: No, I'm not a singer by trade. Actually really just did a lot of freestyle rap. That's a whole lot of words come from my head and make it try to make sense. If it don't sound better than what it did last year, it's because it's hard to improve, but every day, every year, every hour, every second, I'm just lookin' for more ways to improve.

The best never been heard, the best philosopher never philosophized. There's always something to strive for. That's my mentality about it.

AN: There's so much I'm curious about. Have you ever written rhymes down and done it that way?

TOP: I started to write things down last year, and I've written 20 so far, with a 21st on its way.

AN: Written Songs?

TOP: Written songs. There's something I'm working on right now, but it's classified

AN: Have you done any production? Have you ever made beats? Where do you get your beats from?

TOP: Okay, maybe I'm wrong for it, I'm just relying on my sole verbal talent, so I haven't produced any songs. I remix ideas with my words. As much as I love to hear the beat, it's not my area of expertise. I leave it up to the ones who can make it to do that. I leave it to myself just to keep rappin'.

AN: We talked about northern hip-hop versus southern hip-hop, how about this? You're based in a relatively small town, not a city Memphis, not Atlanta, not Houston. How do you think it affects you music, being from a rural area?

TOP: We might not get the same amount of respect because of where we're from, but that makes us more hungry and more determined. We're the underdog by right, and music is all we have.

And that's why I love this whole interview thing—I want people to see my talent in its raw form. I want people to come down to Mississippi and see how we live here so they know what life is like in this part of the world.

AN: How do you feel that you fit in to the music tradition in Clarksdale, and this part of Mississippi?

TOP: Well, I mean, the way I fit in is that, I just go out to the street corners and just publicize my talent and just get out there as part of the community. I don't know how good I am until I hear that response from people around me.

People tell me that I have deep thoughts, and that's what I push for. If my raps can tell you a story and be comforting to someone who's going through the same exact thing, it makes me realized that I am blessed.

AN: Do you see the Delta blues and your music being connected in any way, and if so, how?

TOP: Oh, yes, it is connected--the Delta blues is the reason we have what we have today. I mean, They impregnated us. We're like the little child of it. When they feel we are all out of line they put us in check. It molds our creativity as young musicians, and that's good for us. The blues is like a poor man feelin' down, but it can be about good times, too. We can embrace that and make our music global.

AN: When you say the blues can be a world-wide thing, how do you think about the way hip-hop has spread throughout the world? Do you think it's a community of sorts?

TOP: Well, hip-hop didn't start as a movement, it was a way for us to express ourselves. If you can't talk to your boss about certain things about the way you feel, or if you're against something the government has done, you can use music to express yourself.

AN: So, it's a kind of release?

TOP: It's a release just like heavy metal, classic rock, you know punk music, all of it, turning negative energy into positive. That's why it's good for different kinds of music to mix.

Music needs more healing, you know, it don't need no more heartaches right now.

AN: Why do you think that Aerosmith and RUN-DMC for example, didn't keep recording with hip-hop artists?

TOP: My standpoint about it is: I think it's a lack of respect of the music. Back then, people listened to the words of the songs for their meaning. Now everybody's trying to commodify their music, and they don't put meaning into their work.

I feel that I did my job as a rapper is to keep my message intact.

AN: How do you feel that those ideas inform your work and the words that you use?

TOP: The political and economic problems here are bad, and someone needs to say something about it. People don't respect each other anymore, and it's caused the kind of damage we see with Hurricane Katrina.

The one common thing that we fell back on--that I felt we were missing before is community itself and everybody wanting to help another person out and that's what it's all about.

And we're managing along, but we can be better, but we want to make that change.

AN: What about the situation in Clarksdale in particular?

TOP Absolutely. This is home. It's like your life support, you can't breathe without it.

AN: What exactly do you do at work and how long have you been working there?

TOP: Northwest Regional Medical Center here in Clarksdale. I've been doing it for 13 months now.

AN: I just want to get a brief history of places you performed.

TOP: I've performed at junior high school. Onstage and in front of the class room. Little Boss Block Party on Fort Rucker, Alabama

AN: Did you ever perform at house parties, or at Millennium, or anywhere like that?

TOP: I never perform just at clubs or what have you. It falls back on what people just really want to listen to. You can actually think up deep thoughts and perform them anywhere. The dream is actually just gonna set me free, you know
When I rap, everybody just listens.

AN: And your family encouraged you.

TOP: I say I was my own encouragement. I know that it made a beautiful sound.

AN: Do you remember any rhymes from when you were a kid?

TOP: The first rap that I ever really just freestyled--
[Proceeds to recite a snippet of his first rap, done when he was five years old].

AN: Anything else you think it's important for people to know?

TOP: Prejudice is just a pre-judge
If it's right, then keep it right, if it's wrong, then fix it.
If everybody's playin' cards in your house, and one guy makes trouble, you kick him out.
Everything in life itself be okay. It be smooth sailin', and that's from your boy, T.O.P..
[Proceeds to perform two freestyle pieces].

Appendix E

Partial log of Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams’ interview with Ali Colleen Neff
Clarksdale, MS. Sunday, October 9th, 2005, 4:00 p.m.

Comments: The weekend this interview was conducted, TopNotch and I had spent days visiting important people and places in his life, including his mother, brother, sister, childhood choir director, cousins and friends. I had also had the opportunity to witness (and videotape) TopNotch and a number of his friends performing in his friend’s living room. The previous night, he and his friends took me to Annie Bell’s, a relatively large Clarksdale hip-hop club, where I was able to witness a local DJ perform. Our conversation on this particular day was decidedly more comfortable and conversational than our previous interview, and it was our first chance to discuss the weekend’s events on our own terms. TopNotch helped decide how we should be situated for the interview, because he wanted to be sure that he was looking directly at the camera throughout. He also called me out from behind the camera to join him in the hotseat, where he asked me questions about my research.

AN: This has been an interesting weekend. Tell me about what we did and where you took me Friday night, and why it’s important to the work that you do.

TOP: We started in Lyon subdivision, where I lived as a child. That was the first 13 years of my life. Then we went to Crowder, Mississippi where I spent another 4 years. Then some unfortunate events happened and we had to move to Clarksdale. Then we saw the apartment where I lived with 18 other people in Clarksdale. Sometimes we only had enough food to eat one meal a day, and it made us sick, but whatever we did we did together. I graduated and went to the military shortly thereafter. I showed you where I got my motivation and how being married took that away from me. I told you about how I survived a car accident. I told you about how my cousin was murdered, and how I was held up at the convenience store where I worked and could have been killed. I’ve been showing you the things that have affected the things I say when I freestyle. I do this for these reasons, for the time when I didn’t think I could go on. I wanted to give you all levels of experience. I thank the people at the University of North Carolina for letting me talk about what I do and what I want to see changed. The reason I freestyle is because of the hardship and struggle and racism, but I kept going on. The next day I showed you how we have fun and act a fool in the black community so you could see us together.

AN: You mentioned just now the problem of racism. Would you like to expand on that?

TOP: I want the world to know how sick and disgusting it is. Life should not still be segregated in modern-day slavery. Ignorance is worldwide. One guy shouldn’t be able to walk into a town and make the rules. We need to educate ourselves, and worry about two things in life: good and evil. There shouldn’t be anything between ethnic groups in this country. We should be all as one in peace. I know that I can’t save the world, but if I give you my vision and my freestyle, hopefully someone will listen to me. And a movement starts then. They’ll know I’m for real and maybe the movement will begin. It’s the exact same movement and energy that comes from other forms of African American music. God will thank you for it.

AN: How does your art reflect how you're trying to change things?

TOP: Basically, it's the respect. I can't get respect if I don't give it. My freestyle is a talent that's God-given to me. I won't take it for granted. With dealing drugs, it's sad that we have to put our lives on the line just to feed our children. This whole system is wrong in the first place. We need to know what the problem is. It saddens me that we are not doing anything about that. When you hear my freestyle, I want you to feel me crying out of my soul. We're tired. I believe in prayer, but I believe in reality too. It's the whole state of Mississippi with crooked cops and lawyers. I believe in prayer. What would you do if you saw that things were not right with the world? We're coping down here, but it can get better and I want to see it get better.

AN: How do you think your art will change the situation?

TOP: My art is all I need if I want to change things. I want to make a difference. Us being together in peace, walking down to the congressman's office together to change things—high gas prices, inflation, minimum wage, it's sickening and it needs to change. We pray to the same God together. When we do interviews, this is what I want to talk about. You see such negative things on the TV news, but I want to put something positive in the world. That we would go help another country, but not help our own—that's crazy.

AN: Would you say that you are building a sense of community and making that community stronger?

TOP: I was brought upon good community and everyone helping each other make it. We didn't have anything, but what we did, we gave. It's up to us to advance that community in the next generation. It will Let's party together and let's also help one another as a community.

AN: How do you feel that your work effects change?

TOP: I'm willing to talk about it in my work. If it's mine, I want it. That's the way I see it. I want the world to know that we don't have to accept things the way they are. I won't accept it. I'm winning, and I want others to know how to do it. I won't accept life unless it's what it's supposed to be. It's not product, it's prophesy.

AN: How do you think it affects your audience to hear your freestyle?

TOP: It puts a chill in you spine and a thought in your head and put a rush in your head, then I know it's gotten to you. The first time you hear me freestyle, it's like knocking on the door. The next time, I'm beating on the door. Then I'm kicking it down and making my presence felt. That's what I want you to get out of my freestyle, out of rap and out of life. Don't let anyone stop you from what you want.

AN: When children in you community hear your freestyle, how does it affect them?

TOP: I had a teenager come up to me and shake my hand and thank me for keeping what I'm saying real. If I say it to one person, it will spread—people talk in Mississippi. I told the kid that I won't be satisfied if he doesn't become better than me one day. He laughed and said, "right on." That's what I tell them. I won't be doing this forever.

AN: Yesterday, I met a lot of your friends. It seems that you've taught some of them to freestyle.

TOP: I've given them a sense of direction. Instead of five senses, you have six—the sense of direction. If you see me walk through a mud puddle, you won't take the same route. It makes sense to me. You move your feet like I move this beat, we're both neck to neck. I've been doing freestyle long enough for people to know that they should tell me about who they are and what you've got. There's no money involved, I'm still broke, but I'm showing them that I won't accept poverty. I want to accept some achievement. That's what I'm looking for. The fact that I don't have anything, but I'm still willing to give it back—you do the math.

AN: Are you proud of the people who you've taught to freestyle?

TOP: I'm damn proud. Just like the people that taught me—they're proud of me. I say my Head Start teacher a while back, and I let her know that I'm doing well. I can come back and work at the hospital, highly respected. I'm good to people regardless of how they treat me. From this point on, I'm not looking at this as an interview. I'm looking at this as real talk. You're a friend of mine, and you have questions, and these are my answers. I want to think of this as straight talk. There's a light at the end of this tunnel, and once we see the light, watch out.

AN: You talked about your how head start teachers. Are there other people in the community to which you would compare your role in the community?

TOP: Two people can't teach the same way, so it's not exactly a comparison. Some kids can't look at their moms or dads as role models. I say to these kids, "I'll be your role model. I'll help you lead the way."

AN: Why do you think you took on that role when others might not?

TOP: God blessed me with it, and his will shall be done. It's a no-brainer to go out and help simply because I want to see people do good. If a man has everything in the world, in the end, the soul has nothing. Give a man a fish, and he's straight for that day. Teach a man to fish, and he eats for a lifetime.

AN: Who is your audience?

TOP: Anyone who cares to listen. For everybody who ever wanted to rap but doesn't, for everyone who picks up a pen and puts it down, for everyone who hangs out on the street corner and wants to change. It doesn't take a hand clap to be an audience, but to be a good listener. It's people like you all that give me the motivation to do this, so thank you all.

AN: How does it feel to be in that position in society? To be that guy?

TOP: It's pressure, but it's also pleasure. I'm rhyming just like the next man, but people like my rhymes more, so I got a lucky break. I don't have any regrets withy what I do. I come with my A game always, and the next man might not come with it. But who's to say he's not better than me? I will never try to come wack or half-step it when it comes to freestyle. If it's not heartfelt, I won't say it. If it's not my best foot forward, I won't take a step. Everything that I will spit and put into a freestyle pattern, everything I put into my beat is heartfelt. I think I might just die spitting a freestyle rhyme—that's the way I might leave this world.

AN: So there's a lot of reward, but there's also a lot of challenges. What are some of the challenges?

TOP: The challenge is to keep up with it. I don't want people to say that that was the last time I was good. I want to strive to be better. The reward is that you can walk down the street, and people come up to you and shake your hand or hug you. Feeling that love is a worthwhile treatment for me.

AN: It's a lot of work, isn't it, keeping your craft sharp?

TOP: You have to work at it, like going into business for yourself. You have to have that drive. You have to have that dream and have that encouragement. A lot of people, like my cousin, have given me encouragement. That helped me when I felt that I couldn't go on. I have doubts, but in turn them into diamonds. I want to reach the world, even if it starts in my own backyard.

AN: Why is it important that people outside the community hear you, when you say you want the world to hear you?

TOP: A voice that's never heard will never be recognized. The best word that's never been spoken is God word—that's my religion. You've got to believe in what you say and what you're doing. You live or die with it. It's hard sometimes, but if it was easy, everyone would be doing it. The world needs to know what I'm saying because I want to be a voice that's heard. I want people to understand where I'm coming from. By voicing my thoughts, and my real talk Mississippi.

AN: Do you think people outside of Mississippi need to know what's going on in Mississippi?

TOP: Yes, I think people in Louisiana, Tennessee, and Alabama need to tell what's going on there. You need people to realize you've got good and bad things going. When I tell you that I want this to be real, I want to show you where I'm coming from. Maybe if you reach out and hear what others are saying, it will help you change and grow as a person. It's not about riches-out in the back there's a dead possum. Mississippi's about more than that. I want to show you cotton fields and how we used to chop cotton in the hot sun. I want to tell how we used to pick what truck we wanted to ride on. I want to show how the teachers are underpaid and how the school system is inadequate. The American states are like brothers and sisters—they need to help each other out. We all need to contribute to help the victims

of Hurricane Katrina. In Mississippi, we suffered from Katrina too, but we're not getting the same aid. We need to let people know about that.

AN: Do you ever picture hip-hop artists in other parts of the country listening to what you say?

TOP: I can picture that. What I say is real talk, and I think people will respect my rap and respect me as a freestyle artist. Not only because I can improvise, but because I've got something to say, and I want to say it to the world. I'm not holding back.

AN: We got to meet your mom, and we got to meet Miss Martha, your choir director. How does their work influence manifest itself in your work?

TOP: I'll start with my mother. I'm the middle of six children, and one or two didn't happen to make it, it's unfortunate, but we move on. We didn't have name-brand clothes, but we were decent. I didn't understand it at the time, but I'm glad she disciplined us. I wouldn't change a think. That's why we visited my Mom.

Miss Martha influenced me and brought religion into my life. She didn't just settle for me going to church—she put me in the choir and told me to sing a song. She also encouraged me to improvise in my songs. She taught me that it was okay to make up lyrics and be creative. She taught me about trial and error—that it was okay to make mistakes and get back up again. It might hurt to bump your head, but it really hurts not to get backup.

AN: Who else encouraged you to get back up?

TOP: I encouraged myself. I was also encouraged by people I was in the military with. But I know that my performance speaks for itself. Some people may not like who I am, but I'll keep working because God gave me this gift. If God has something for me to do, I'll do it.

AN: How did people like your mom and Miss Martha affect your style? We talked a little last time about you were surrounded by people writing songs and poems growing up.

TOP: My uncle Larry writes love poems, and my auntie too. My rap, my lyrics is like those poems. I express those feelings. When I feel things, my pen expresses that joy. Who ever thought this would ever happen to me right now—sitting here in a trailer talking real talk? It's a blessing that some people might say is well overdue. Maybe it's time for me to reap what I sow. I think God has seen me suffering so much, and I think right now is my reward.

AN: (Power goes off momentarily) We were talking about how Miss Martha used to encourage you to write lyrics.

TOP: I was 13 at the time. And what made me do that all of a sudden is that people would turn out for choir practice, but didn't make it to church. We knew that we couldn't do all of the parts of the song ourselves, so I had to put some things in and take some things out. And the whole turnout was that people still talk about it to this day, so it had to be a good thing. And as much as people told me not to juke joint in the church, they still talk about it

to this day. Once you get pushed into a corner, you learn how to come up swinging. Basically that's what it was with the choir and I wouldn't change a thing.

AN: Do you think Miss Martha minded you making up those lyrics?

TOP: She was more surprised than anything, but she and everyone else would go along with it. Some days, we pulled a rabbit out of the hat.

AN: Can you give me an example of some lyrics that you made up?

TOP: (Laughs) No...

AN: Did you just jump in and become the leader?

TOP: It depends on who was leading the song. If I felt they weren't coming with it, I'd give them a helping hand. Or sometimes I would be leading the song. The most meaningful songs that would inspire me were the struggle-type songs. My all-time favorite gospel song is "Troubles of the World" by Mahalia Jackson. It gives me chills up my spine, and I want my rhymes to give you those same chills.

AN: When you would makeup lyrics, was it on the spot?

TOP: It was always on the spot. It's just something that I always did. And it wasn't always good.

AN: Was it the preacher who said that you were jukin'? What did he mean by that?

TOP: He felt like we were cutting up like black folks in general would on a Saturday night. But I kept it up. Once you're rejoicing, who can judge you? I know people who said they caught the Holy Ghost, and I used to think they were playing. So who's to judge? You look at it the way you look at it.

AN: Was he saying that that belongs in the secular world?

TOP: It was more the dancing aspect of what I was doing it that was the problem.

AN: Did you get rewarded for making up lyrics? Did anyone give you praise?

TOP: Yes, they would say, "You sure pulled it out." I'd say that it was not the fact that what we had was not plentiful, but it was the fact that what we had was our song and singing like that. It was the fact that didn't have anything that made us enjoy making up those lyrics. I think God inspired us—that he was just taking care of his children. When life is too much to bear, he'll help us breathe easy.

AN: Why did you go into hip-hop instead of staying with gospel? Or could you do both?

TOP: I feel like I started from within religion. I think God gave me this gift. He'll stop me when he doesn't want me to do this anymore. During the time I've been improving my skills, I've blessed the people for encouraging me for all those years.

AN: It seems like Miss Martha was proud of you for doing your freestyle.

TOP: It's because I told her that I'd always be honest with her. She still tells me about God's word. At times, I might not want to hear it, but it's much needed. I want to give it back. I'm just trying to give back to the world. It wasn't mine in the first place—all I did was tamper with it. And the next person will tamper with it after me.

AN: Do you take any of the lyrics you used in the gospel songs when you were a kid and use elements of them in your hip-hop?

TOP: I'm careful about that because I don't want to offend the elder people. God gave me this talent and he can take it away. Just because I understand the context of the way I put it, doesn't mean that next person will take it the right way. I don't want to cross that line. Out of respect, I separate the lyrics of gospel and my freestyle.

AN: Do you change the things you rap about according to your audience?

TOP: Oh yes, you have to. People might listen to me because my style is so good, but they do pick up my words too. I don't want kids to pick up stuff from me and tell their parents where they got it from.

AN: When you were with your crew yesterday, some of those guys do use those words. How does that fit with what you do?

TOP: I don't knock people for what they do. You can only just motivate other people—you can't tell them what to do. But I want people to hear what I know, and that I'm educated. I'm intelligent—it's not grades, but the choices you make in life. It's correcting the choices you made.

AN: Who were the guys you were playing with last night?

TOP: Timothy Williams, a.k.a. Small Tyme, Young J Buggs and K-Deezy. And of course, me, TopNotch the Vill.

AN: It seems like last night, the beats would start, and you would set the theme, and everyone would follow. Is that how that works? Is that usually the structure?

TOP: Well, the beat would start, and we would look at each other, and the person who felt the beat would jump in. Buggs was feeling the chorus, so he would pop right on in with it. Everything that you saw this weekend, none of it was planned. No one knew that anyone was doing this but me. I took you through my whole life, and showed you what I do. I showed you the cuttin' up on a Saturday night and the girls shakin' their bottoms.

I took you into a hot house and showed you how we could rap off the top of our domes for two hours straight. None of this was scripted or directed. The first cut was the only cut. When the camera started rolling, we started rolling. Who ever would have thought? Real talk.

AN: So this tour you took me on, it was a kind of freestyle.

TOP: That's exactly what it was. You heard it from her. You'll see on the tape of all those performances, and you can see that I did a whole song with no script. I want you to see that all of this is unscripted and freestyle. I want you to see that there are young girls who can rap, too. I'm proud that this girl looked up to me and asked me for my advice, and she ran with it. Did you hear that girl? She was bad!

ALI: What was her name?

TOP: Kimyata Dear. She'll be the princess one day. I want this to be simple, uncut raw material.

AN: How do you see the next step of your mission?

TOP: I want it to be an over-the-top, mind-boggling experience. I want to inspire people. I want the chance to do it. I want to be challenged and to challenge others.

AN: I've had a chance to see your past and the person you are now. What about the person you're becoming?

TOP: Scary, isn't it? I want you to hear that I worked hard, and I want to be respected.

AN: Where do you picture yourself in five years?

TOP: I don't picture myself. I don't know if I'll be here tomorrow. I don't picture myself in a big house with three baby's mommas—that's a joke.

AN: I've answered a lot of the larger questions I had, and had some smaller, detailed ones I wanted to ask. But before I get to those, I wanted to see if there's anything you want to talk about.

Appendix I

Notes from visit between “TopNotch the Villain” Williams, Martha Raybon and Ali Colleen Neff. Crowder, MS. October 7th, 2005, 9:00 p.m.

Comments: TopNotch took me to a number of locations to meet his friends and family, the first of whom was Miss Martha, the choir director of Crowder’s First Oak Grove, his childhood church. She was uncomfortable with being interviewed in front of the camera, and I thought it important that I take very minimal notes and instead absorb the conversation. Two of her grandsons played at the coffee table while we conversed. Her home was a modest, older trailer decorated beautifully with calico remnants and colorful wall hangings. The mood quickly turned from tepid and careful to warm and joyous. She told us about how she prayed to the Lord before deciding to be a part of this project. As Miss Martha walked TopNotch and me out to his car, she began to sing spirituals, including “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” and TopNotch joined in. Following are a few of the notes and observations I made during this interview.

Quotes:

TopNotch: “We used gospel to get free. That’s what I used my rap for. That’s why my rhymes have a deep concern.”

“The only way we can be free is by lettin’ it out. That’s what gospel was to slavery. That’s how they moved from place to place for freedom. This is my cry.”

“I’m their success story. My cup is overflowing.”

“I want you to capture my life and the life of my freestyle.”

Miss Martha: “He’ll [TopNotch] come back to the church—most blues singers started out that way.”

“I’ve had an open-door policy for any child.”—regarding choir attendance and personal support

“You can get up in front of a crowd and do your best.”—referring to any child’s abilities

“I’ve still got some push left in me”—regarding her methodology of teaching children, which she refers to as “the push.”

Interactions:

At one point, Miss Martha and TopNotch discuss his participation in the choir. He became known in the church for making up new lyrics for the songs and surprising the congregation--and his choir director—with his off-the-cuff lyrics. At one point, Miss Martha

chides TopNotch about his choir dancing: “Did you ever learn to move right? Or are you still stiff?”

“I would move to the point I was beginning to juke joint, and Reverend Hennessey told me I better stop it,” says TopNotch.

He explains that when he was nine years old, the Reverend Henderson scolded him for making up lyrics and dancing in a way that belonged in the juke joint.

TopNotch points out that Miss Martha and his family both encouraged him to improvise new lyrics for the spirituals, and that TopNotch enjoyed his ability to keep everyone on his or her toes.

They also discuss Miss Martha’s role in her community as a nurturer and teacher. She was also known for her method of discipline, which involved a switch.

Although she chides TopNotch for not attending church, Miss Martha seems to be full of pride in her former student. She seems especially pleased when he mentions that he focuses on positive issues for the community and does not swear when rhyming.

Before we leave, I ask Miss Martha if she has any questions for me. She asks if I really think TopNotch will “make it” as a hip-hop artist. I answer that I do not know, but that I think he is incredibly talented.

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Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams (with author) Clarksdale, Mississippi, September 3rd, 2005.

Jerome “TopNotch the Villain” Williams (with author) Clarksdale, Mississippi, October 9th, 2005.

Jeweline Williams (with author) Lambert, Mississippi, July 14th, 2006.

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