

The Godfather of Gangsta Rap Hits Bangkok

In the middle of the MBK mall in Bangkok, one of hip-hop's most notorious anti-heroes was out shopping for DVDs and computer games. He was walking around with his blonde and buxom wife Coco, and his portly, right-hand DJ Afrika Islam, when an old Chinese man came running up and said, "Ice-T number one!" Soon the three of them were encircled by snappy Japanese tourists. Far from the fear and revulsion that Ice and Afrika provoked in the late 80s, here was the living proof of hip-hop's ascendance from the ghettos of black America to the mainstream of globe-wide mall culture.

As Matt Hammond of the Q Bar recounted these anecdotes to us in the club shortly before we were supposed to interview the rapper and actor, I had to ask him, "You mean Ice was cool with this?"

"He shook people's hands, posed for pictures. He's very down to earth," said Matt, who helped to pull off one of the biggest musical coups in Bangkok in 2005 by booking Ice-T to hand out the awards for their "Battle of the MCs" contest and do a live set.

This was reassuring news. After all, Ice-T is one of the godfathers of gangsta rap who, back in the late 80s, ignited a few firestorms, fanned

by feminists and banned by censors, for all his hard-hitting rhymes about racism, crime, prisons, the Gulf War and multi-sexual references to “bitches” (and what you could do to them with a flashlight). Then Ice formed the group Body Count which soldered together metal, punk and hip-hop into a scary new juggernaut called “rap-metal.” That aptly named group (three of the original members are now dead) sparked a scandal with the tune “Cop Killer” on their debut album from ’92 – as Ice recited a body count of victims like Rodney King brutalized by the police while the band chanted the title a record that was also noteworthy for proving that the New Jersey native, who grew up on the darkest streets of LA, was one of the few rappers who could actually sing, well, scream and growl mostly. But his infamy turned into mainstream fame with a long-running role on TV’s *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, and guest appearances on *CSI: NY* in 2010. The former pimp and drug dealer – real name: Tracy Marrow – playing a cop?

For a few days, I’d been writing up scores of questions, trying to memorise them while dreading all the worst-case scenarios: Ice would sit there with his arms folded across his chest, shoot me down with a few .45-calibre glares and then punch me in the head. Or he’d think my questions were idiotic, reply with a few monosyllabic grunts, catch me sneaking a

peek at his wife's cleavage, and *then* punch me in the head.

Matt came down to the bar where me and Daniel Cooper, the photographer, were knocking back beer after beer in order to quiet our rioting nerves. "Okay, you guys are up. You've got 20 minutes."

Shit. I should've picked up some adult diapers.

Upstairs, the near-middle-aged rapper and actor was sitting beside his wife on the couch. From his baseball cap right down to his shoes he was entirely clad in black. Even his prescription glasses were half-shaded with midnight. Seeing him sitting there only five metres away was like one of those nerve-racking moments every student remembers, when you're walking into the classroom for a big exam and suddenly you've forgotten everything you studied. I couldn't remember any of my questions. So I just stood there, dumb and frozen as a statue, thinking I should send Daniel over to ask Ice if he was into playing "Dungeons and Dragons" and let him be the one who gets punched in the head.

But I recalled Matt saying something about a couple of new albums Ice was working on, one of them in collaboration with Chuck D from Public Enemy. At least that would break the ice. Still twitching a little, I sat down beside him and we shook hands.

So what's up with your new albums and collaborations?

“Machine is a group with me, Chuck, Ernie from Body Count, and different people rappin’ and playin’ instruments on it. It’s kinda like Prodigy meets Body Count meets Public Enemy... but it’s more of a virtual group like Gorillaz where were all in the studio and there’s a DJ playing the record and it’s more of a multi-media presentation.”

On this tour, when you’ve been rapping all over Asia and Australia, what tunes have you been playing?

“I’ve been playing tracks from the new Ice-T album, *Gangsta Rap*, and we’re mixing a new Body Count album called *Murder for Hire*. In all honesty, I just wanted to come to Asia and I had a break from *Law and Order*, so let’s go do a tour, play some small clubs, and other events, and give ourselves a reason to see it. So we’re havin’ a good time.”

If you get a break when you’re on the road, or just wanna take a holiday, where do you like to go and what do you get up to?

“I mean, personally, when I’m spendin’ my money,” Ice laughed, “usually it’s some place tropical, like the Bahamas, or South Beach Miami, anywhere it’s warm and we can get in the water. That’s my dream vacation, but sometimes it’s fun to go out and explore, and this is an exploration. It’s rewarding too, because some of the places I’ve done with music I would never have gone in my life.”

When you're traveling, does that inspire you to write new rhymes?

“Oh, definitely. I think nothin’ makes you more intelligent than travel.

When you live in a closed-in environment you tend to think all your interests are your own, and you don’t know they’re worldwide. You don’t understand life. You need to travel. You need to see different things. You come over here you might realize you’re doin’ alright.”

With your new albums, what are you rapping about these days? Have your concerns changed much over the years?

“I changed a lot. I’ve matured. But no, my philosophy’s pretty successful and I’m dealin’ with my home boys who are in the same situation. I speak for them. Just because I’m doin’ okay doesn’t mean things have changed for the average black kid in the hood. So I try to remain that voice and I let you know I’m talkin’ about other people.”

With some of your early records like Power you were championing freedom of speech. When you look back from this vantage point, under the Bush administration with all its propaganda and censorship, does it seem to you like America is progressing or regressing?

“Unfortunately, man, I’m kinda cynical. I think what I said really didn’t change the world, but maybe it got into some kids who now got power. And they go into a bank and the bank president says, ‘I grew up on Ice Cube

and Ice-T,’ and just that little bit of maybe being part of your life, that was what was important. You’re not gonna yell about this and things are gonna change. There’s kids that grew up now who listened to Public Enemy, so when they’re mother said, ‘Nigger,’ they yell, ‘Ma, they’re not niggers.’ And that home invasion is what was more important to us. And I think it has shifted the way people think.”

Has it been difficult for you to live up to your reputation as a tough, outspoken, womanizing guy?

“My thing is that a lot of the shit I do is more, I guess what you’d say, posturing yourself as a gangster. So we talk shit to the girls, we’re just talkin’ shit to the girls, ya know what I’m sayin’? It’s not so much we take it to heart. It’s kinda like... it’s shit talkin’,” Ice laughed. “But it’s not really ‘cause you still gotta have the balls to get on-stage and say it.” Ice laughed again, revealing a dimpled grin and broke off eye contact, a brief glimpse of the man’s softer side that he usually keeps hidden. “It’s no more different than the posturing of Slayer. When they walk on-stage and say, ‘Yo, we are the devil,’ and then they scare the shit outta you, and then after the show they’re playin’ Playstation.”

Ice cracked me up with that last line.

I remember the first time I ever heard a tune by you, it was back in a

punk rock club in Montreal around 1989, and this line jumped out of the speakers at me, “He fucked the bitch with a flashlight.” Me and my punk rock buddies at the time thought there was a lot of, uh pardon the pun, but black humour in your rhymes. But the feminists attacked you.

“Oh they got serious. They lost their minds. That record was ‘The Iceberg’ [from Ice-T’s second album, *The Iceberg/Freedom of Speech*, 1989].” He began rapping, “EZ E was out coolin’ with a freak one night/
Fucked the bitch with a flashlight/Pulled it out and left the batteries in/So he could get a charge when he begin.’ You know, it’s like how stupid is that?” Ice laughed. “Come on, man, it’s just bullshit.”

(A braver critic could have suggested that the fury with which he delivered those lines on the album was a far cry from stand-up comedy.)

With the global explosion of hip-hop, and all these white kids, Asians, Hispanics going around calling each other “dog” and “homie” and talkin’ about “bitches and hos” what’s your take on that?

“I don’t really care. They just like the music, ya know what I’m sayin’? At some point, music becomes sonic. And what I mean by that is I can listen to Indian music. I may not understand any of the words, but I like the sound of it. People like the groove of hip-hop. They don’t need to speak the language. I been to places where people can say the rhymes but don’t

know what they mean. And that's cool. I don't have a problem with that. There's guys who never been near a horse and they love country music and wear a cowboy hat. There's Elvis impersonators here, they never been to Memphis."

Right, sure, but Ice, when Spike Lee spoke out against Quentin Tarantino using the word "nigger" so much in his movies...

"I think Spike is stupid on that one. The thing you gotta remember is that black people are just like white people, we don't all agree. So Spike, yo, I think Tarantino was bein' realistic and he was lettin' you see how white people talk when black people ain't around, and we should applaud him for that. Because to me Tarantino is like a *Hustler* magazine, or *The Simpsons* or *South Park*, he gives it to everybody. Spike, I respect the fuck out of his filmmaking and shit. You know Spike might say I'm an idiot, but I like Tarantino."

With your detective show on TV, Law and Order: Special Victims Unit, well, I know you played a cop in the 80s film New Jack City, but some of your old fans must be thinking, Ice should be a guy running from the police, not playing one of them. Have you gotten much flak for the role or has the feedback been quite positive?

"Like I said, by now the hip-hop posse is educated. They're like, Ice is

acting, he's doin' big things, we're proud of him. We know Ice isn't in the streets sellin' drugs, he's not a gangster. He was, but the greatest day in a gangster's life is when he can get the cops to protect him."

We both laughed.

Did you base the character much on your own experiences or run-ins with the police?

"The director said, 'Ice, you've spent time around the police, show us how to play one and give us the cops we meet on the streets.' It's like yo, with law enforcement, if they're doin' it right you gotta respect 'em. I just hated brutal and corrupt cops who would put you in jail and then smoke weed on the way home. Or beat your ass for some bullshit. I mean honestly, bottom line is I'm nobody but a motherfucker from the streets and when the opportunities opened up I took the opportunities."

So where would you be today if it wasn't for music and acting?

"Dead."

Yeah?

"Definitely dead, because my end was fucked up. I totally believe that the world owes me somethin' 'cause I don't have no mother, father, sisters or brothers. I was like a very bitter individual. I was the kinda person who'd come into a place like this and be a hater, I'd wanna start a fight or

somethin'. I was jus' angry. When I got my way to express myself, I didn't feel that anger anymore. 'Cause now I wouldn't have to act out about it, I could just make a song and get my point across. So right now you might wanna tell everybody in here to get fucked, right?"

Uh no, only about nine or 10 people... mostly other journalists.

Ice grinned. "So what do you do? Do you throw a bottle? No. You go make a record and you tell the whole world to –

"Get fucked!" we both said in unison.

But how did you actually start out in music?

"I started out with just party rhymes because I wanted to be a DJ. So I did the DJ thing and then I learned how to rhyme. And my friends, who were like criminals, said to rhyme about us. And that was the invention of gangster rap."

Ice broke into a verse from one of his most famous songs, "6 in the Mornin'" rangster," ??? accenting the beats with his right hand. "Ten years ago I used to listen to rappers flow/Talk about the way they rocked the mic in the disco/I liked that as it was goin' down/Dreamt of rippin' the mic with my own sound/ So I tried to write rhymes somethin' like them/My boys said Ice that ain't you it sounds like him/So I sat back thought up a new track/ Didn't fantasize kept the pure facts/Motherfuckers got scared 'cause they

was unprepared/To tell it how it really was who dared?/Motherfucker from
the West Coast LA/South Central kid where the Crips and the Bloods play/
When I wrote about parties it didn't fit/Six in the morning that was the real
shit.”

He stopped rapping and said, “We had lots of money and we were the
bad guys. It was more like me comin' into the club and cheerleadin' for
my crew. Like right now if we were in here, and you were in the clique,
you're worth a million dollars, you're 19 years old, you're rollin'. We got
the cars, we got the motorcycles and you want the girls. So you go to the DJ
and say, 'I want my man to rap.' You give him 500 dollars and we got the
cordless mic. We're sittin' in the corner. What's your name?”

Jim.

Ice began rapping, “Yo, my man Jim is in da house/Hey all you bitches
he needs to get his dick sucked/All you other guys can get fucked...” After
that it got a lot more obscene. Sure I was flattered, but later I would think,
has he done this to a lot of other writers? Maybe it was spontaneous. Maybe
Ice-T knows how to spin the press in circles like a record.

“We were talkin' crazy, but it was so raw it just gave it a whole new style.
So gangsta came about from entertaining gangsters. You gotta think that
when you got a tough crowd, they don't wanna hear no happy shit. They

wanna hear the rhymes about the cocaine, and the guns, and the girls.”

At this point in your career when you've had a fair bit of success, money, movie roles, and beautiful women, is there anything else you'd like to do?

“I'd like to direct films. We're startin' up a new label, a record label, and I wanna get behind the scenes and run a company, break some new artists. I go to movies and I'm still excited. I love the whole process of creation.”

With your group Body Count, three members have passed away, like the bass-player Mooseman in a drive-by shooting. Has that lessened your passion to make music?

“I couldn't work on Body Count for a whole year after D-Rock [the group's guitarist, who was so shy he played on-stage wearing a hockey goalie mask like Jason in *Friday the 13th*] passed. What we did was take the tracks he'd laid down as a demo and I finished those tracks and did the vocals on them. So with this album we have D-Rock playin' on it. I'll put the record and the video out and see if there's enough interest to keep that band goin'.”

But did you deal with all these deaths of your band-mates on any kind of emotional level or just through your music and acting?

“I hate to say this, but I'm so useta people dyin'. But it was really really tough with D-Rock...” Ice looked off into a dark corner of the club.

The pause was painful, so I took an off-ramp in the conversation. *You ever think about running for political office?*

“No, I told you, I got outta crime.”

I sniggered, but to him politics is no laughing matter.

How do you feel about all the new R&B and hip-hop crossover artists like 50 Cent?

“It’s dance music. It’s club music. You can’t hold 50 Cent up against NWA. It doesn’t scare people. Everybody knows 50 will get a sneaker endorsement. It’s tame. Only violence in rap nowadays is us rappers shootin’ each other,” Ice laughed. “We just talk shit on the record and bump into the motherfucker in the club, I mean, aw shit, gotta kill him now.”

I laughed, thanked him and shook his hand again.

Ice said, “Good interview.”

THE ORIGINAL GANGSTA

LIVE IN BANGKOK

When the rapper, wearing a baggy black Versace T-shirt, took the small stage by the DJ booth at Q Bar to give out the awards for the best MCs, he cracked up the crowd by offering one of them “a bag of some knock-off shit from MBK” and got a few more laughs by telling another rapper, “Second

place is the first loser.” But he posed for pictures with his arms around the winners and even grinned a few times. Maybe it was the crammed-to-capacity venue, maybe it was having to play the nice guy for a change, but he didn’t look all that comfortable.

When the first track finally kicked in, with DJ Afrika Islam laying down some hard and heavy beats, Ice looked more in character. No matter what he said about “posturing like a gangster” during the interview, his aura of menace, and the way he yelled, “You think this shit ain’t real? Ask my homie Tupac. He died for this music,” seemed anything but artifice.

For a man pushing 50, Ice-T still sounded like he was in his prime. The fat baritone of his vocals had not gone flabby and his bullet-point rhymes rarely misfired. Renowned for his showmanship, Ice was boxed in by the tiny stage, and largely reduced to spinning invisible turntables with his right hand, glowering at the crowd, and occasionally rubbing his crotch, but the cramped venue was much more intimate than a bigger club, and the five hundred people on hand were thrilled to catch a bona fide musical outlaw in action during yet another year of old deadbeats playing half-alive in Bangkok.

Judging by the title track of his new album *Gangsta Rap* Ice was still flying in the face of the prevailing trade winds in MTV hip-pop and had not

toned down either his sound or content. If he was not putting any new spins on his old themes, there was no lipstick gloss applied to the music, no black girls cooing on the choruses, and no attempt made to shortchange the die-hards by cashing in on the 50 Cent craze.

The crowd went ballistic with applause for “Colors,” his old smash about gang warfare that was the theme song for the movie of the same name, and he brought down the house with “OG. Original Gangster” as Ice, backed by another rapper, yelled, “OG,” before shoving the mic into the crowd so the faithful could shout, “Original Gangster!”

In the late 80s, when gangsta became public enemy number one in the music world, many critics and musicians did not give the nascent genre a fair hearing. They thought it was a fad, soon to be spent and relegated to pop culture’s junkyard. Listen to those beats a little more closely and you can hear the echo of a bloodline that courses through African-American-Jamaican music of the 20th century, from the funk of Sly Stone and James Brown, through the rise-above anthems of the oppressed in reggae and dub, the samplings of Motown and Memphis soul, all the way back to the Mississippi delta, where Robert Johnson would alternate singing and speaking lines (the “talkin’ blues” it was called) on misogynistic tunes about hell-raising and woman-beating like “Me and the Devil Blues”: a tradition

brought to America by the black slaves from Mali.

Fittingly enough, Ice ended the set with a shout out to the rap pioneer and unsung producer who fused so many of these different genres together. “Without Africa Bambattaa, there would’ve been no Ice-T.”

Maybe, but without Ice-T and his brethren from NWA, there would have been no pale imitations like Vanilla Ice and 50 Cent.