Original Gangstas: The Untold Story of Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, Ice Cube, Tupac Shakur, and the Birth of West Coast Rap

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L.A. gangsta rap doesn't get the same respect as its East Coast counterpart. Journalist Westhoff sets out to change that in this insightful and quite hefty history of West Coast rap. He concentrates on the leading figures of the movement, including Eazy-E (Eric Wright), Dr. Dre (Andre Young), Ice Cube (O'Shea Jackson), Ice-T (Tracy Marrow), Snoop Dogg (Calvin Broadus), Biggie Smalls, also known as the Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace), and Tupac Shakur. He writes about the rivalries among hip-hop record labels such as Eazy's Ruthless Records and Suge Knight's Death Row, and the often dysfunctional backgrounds of many of the rappers. He discusses now-iconic hip-hop albums and controversial singles, addresses the genre's misogynistic lyrics and its struggles with the establishment, and acknowledges the music's vast cultural impact. The sections on the murders of Shakur and Smalls are sensitively handled (both crimes remain unsolved). Today, hip-hop has fully entered the mainstream, and hard-edged hip-hop, in particular, he insists, has become "the defining musical movement of a generation." Westhoff's history is especially relevant amid the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement. Copyright 2014 Booklist Reviews.

LJ Reviews 2016 August #1

Weighing in on the long history of the genre, Westhoff's (Dirty South) latest effort is a captivating chronicle that traces the rise of West Coast rap, from its humble origins in Compton, CA to its global dominance. The narrative begins with the story of Eric White, in 1985 a 21-year-old drug pusher from Compton, CA, and on his way to a career as the renamed Eazy-E. From there it's a roller-coaster ride as Westoff introduces us to Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, Tupac Shakur, Suge Knight, and a panoply of artists, players, and hangers-on in the gangsta rap scene. Central to Westhoff's research are original interviews with key figures balanced with the author's efforts to frame the music as a piece with the surrounding social and political upheaval of the time. Hip-hop may have arrived in the cultural mainstream, and it has certainly proved itself to be a huge financial success, but the process to make it so has included more than the usual amount of ambition, ... and controversy. It's to the author's credit that he doesn't flinch in providing a rounded picture of the history of the genre, in which the danger wasn't confined to the music. VERDICT Westhoff's readable, firsthand narrative of the "defining music of a generation" will appeal to lovers of hip-hop and music history buffs.—Bill Baars, Lake Oswego P.L., OR

PW Reviews 2016 June #2

In this sprawling history, journalist Westhoff (Dirty South) follows West Coast rap from the mean streets of Compton and south central Los Angeles to international prominence. Inspired by the first wave of hip-hop, artists such as Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, and Easy E, Westhoff introduces us to the world of gangsta rap, the rise of Eazy-E and his record label, Ruthless, and the struggle between the East and West Coast. From the crack era to the 1990s, gangsta rap became a cultural phenomenon, but also a series of controversies and legal battles. Westhoff's comprehensive research makes this an invaluable overview of the musical influences and legal nightmares of West Coast rap's main players, and his book will stand as a comprehensive guide to an inner-city movement that conquered the world. Agent: Bassoff, Ethan, Lippincott Massie
Original Gangstas is a thorough and engrossing telling of the rise of West Coast Rap. Mr. Westhoff did extensive research, interviewed countless people, and sifted through fact, opinion, and hearsay like the professional journalist that he is. The characters are all portrayed as the very real, very flawed, and very talented individuals they were. I started listening to NWA when I was 11 way back in the 80s, fascinated by the lyrics and the gangsta lifestyle it remained my music of choice until the last 8-9 years when it all went BAD. This account fills so many gaps in my mind about the story of all the artists mentioned. Highly recommended. The real story behind the origin of gangsta rap is difficult to discern. Between the bombastic rhetoric and imagery, the larger-than-life characters, and the subsequent success of many of the individuals, it is hard to know exactly what to believe. …