

ESSAY

# “The South Got Something to Say” Atlanta’s Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America

by **Darren E. Grem**



*In a stark contrast to the days when Sherman’s troops occupied this Confederate fort outside Atlanta, the city’s rappers now have invaded the rest of the country’s hip-hop scene, burning up the charts, unfurling the Dirty South’s banner, and spreading its culture across the nation as they southernize Hip-Hop America. Photograph courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.*



y the summer of 1995, the Atlanta-based rap group OutKast had watched their first album, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, achieve platinum sales of over one million. This feat earned them an award for “Best New Group” from *The Source* magazine and an invitation to attend the hip-hop publication’s second annual awards show in New York City. Goodie Mob, another Atlanta group, joined them on the trip up north. As Big Gipp, a member of Goodie Mob, remembered, their reception from the New York audience was less than favorable: “When Big Boi and Dre [of OutKast] got out there at those *Source* Awards, everybody was like, ‘boooo, boooo, boooo.’ I remember it was just OutKast and the four Goodie Mob members and I was like, man. . . . Don’t nobody even give a fuck about us folk.” Leaving the *Source* Awards that night, OutKast and Goodie Mob swore to each other to “show all them motherfuckers” that “one day they’re gonna have to fuck with us.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the next decade, OutKast, Goodie Mob, and other southern rappers followed through on their intentions, moving to the forefront of America’s hip-hop culture industry. In 2004 OutKast won six Grammys, including an “Album of the Year” award, for their multi-platinum fifth effort, *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*. On that night, no one in the star-studded Los Angeles audience doubted that, as OutKast had yelled back at the booing crowd nine years before, “the South got something to say.”<sup>2</sup>

What the South had to say reveals much about the making and marketing of regional and racial identity in modern America. Most explicitly, the rise of Atlanta’s “Dirty South” rap music industry shows the readiness of some African Americans in the post-civil rights era not only to embrace their southernness but to sell it as well. Throughout the 1990s, industry leaders and southern rappers promoted the Dirty South as a new type of rap music. A blending of older rap styles with southern music, accents, and themes, Dirty South rap was also a bold statement from rappers who felt estranged from Atlanta’s economic and social progress and excluded by their southernness from competing in a rap-music market dominated by New York and Los Angeles. By the end of the 1990s, however, their unique coupling of regional and racial identity had earned them increased attention from listeners and critics alike and a reputation as innovators of a fresh, new sound and style in hip-hop culture. The next wave of southern rappers built on this emergent appeal but in the process changed the meaning of the Dirty South. Leaving behind the more troubling aspects of their regional identity, southern rappers after 2000 preferred to promote the Dirty South as a loosely defined, inclusive concept and a lucrative set of attractive commodities. Thus, by the time OutKast accepted their Grammys in 2004, the Dirty South was not only a banner under which a wide variety of southern rappers now congregated. It was also a culture industry that had “southernized” what cultural critic Nelson George has termed the multibillion dollar business of “hip-hop America.”<sup>3</sup>

The importance of Atlanta's Dirty South industry can only be understood by placing it in the wider context of rap music in America. During the 1970s and 1980s, the everyday problems of life in urban black ghettos contributed to the subject matter and complex politics of American rap. Though some critics dismissed rap's portrayals of racial identity as juvenile laudations of violence, sexism, and greed, the cultural message of "East Coast" New York rappers and "West Coast" California rappers registered with young blacks and voyeuristic whites across America, creating for the first time a profitable mass market for rap. During the 1980s and early 1990s, record sales by New York rappers Run-DMC, Eric B. & Rakim, LL Cool J, Public Enemy, Wu-Tang Clan, and Los Angeles-Bay Area "gangsta" rappers N.W.A., Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Tupac Shakur went into the millions. Political conservatives, family groups, minority-rights groups, and older African Americans reacted strongly against the raw sexuality and violence depicted in urban rap lyrics. But despite these protests, rap music's unsettling presentation of black identity had secured a lasting and profitable place in the public imagination and in the popular-music market.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1980s and early 1990s, southern rappers often assumed the East and West Coast's versions of black identity as their own. In Miami, 2 Live Crew earned fame and drew censure for their sexually charged "booty shake" bass music; in New Orleans, Master P's No Limit record label became a multi-platinum seller of West Coast-styled gangsta rap; in Houston, the Geto Boys rose to fame as one of the region's fiercest and most controversial rap groups; in Memphis, Eightball & MJG and Three 6 Mafia sold tens of thousands of their hard-core albums and achieved legendary status across the South. In Atlanta, East and West Coast themes tended to hold sway as well because the anticipated rewards of the post-civil rights era seemed as fleeting in inner city Atlanta as they did in the Bronx or south-central Los Angeles. According to a 1993 study, median incomes for black Atlantans in 1990 were a meager \$22,372 while white incomes averaged \$61,691. Between 1970 and 1975, the city's white population also declined more rapidly than that of Newark or Detroit. Likewise, middle- and upper-class black Atlantans moved to the suburbs, leaving poorer blacks to fend for themselves in their dying neighborhoods. By the time of the 1996 Olympic Games, the population of suburban Atlanta had become quite diverse, but the inner city still retained levels of crime, spatial segregation, and racial poverty that ranked among the highest of any American metropolitan area.<sup>5</sup>

Atlanta's first rappers emerged from this forgotten environment. During the 1980s, the local hip-hop club scene flourished in several black neighborhoods around Atlanta due to the Miami-style bass music of rappers like Mojo, Kilo, and Raheem. A few gangsta artists, such as Sammy Sam, also sold well locally, while less aggressive groups, such as Kris Kross, Tag Team, and Arrested Development, attained brief success outside the region. But Atlanta was hardly a rap Mecca since



*In 2004 OutKast won six Grammys, including an “Album of the Year” award, for their multi-platinum fifth effort, Speakerboxxx/The Love Below (here), from Arista.*

fans of mainstream East and West Coast rap either ignored Atlanta’s assortment of local rappers or considered its collection of “nice rappers” better suited for selling singles to sensitive listeners than for setting trends. If Atlanta rap was to become a serious distributor of mass-market rap, it needed more than just local or temporary appeal. More than anything, it needed a figurehead, a business leader committed to turning Atlanta rappers into market leaders.

Atlanta’s LaFace Records assumed that role. Founded in 1989 by Antonio “L.A.” Reid and Kenneth “Babyface” Edmonds, by 1994 LaFace had already cultivated a reputation as the “Motown of the South” with crossover R&B artists like Toni Braxton, TLC, and Usher. When Edmonds left for Los Angeles in 1994, Reid took over most of the label’s administrative duties. He also saw promise in making Atlanta a center for mass-market rap. His most talented prospect was a group of teenage rappers managed by Atlanta’s Organized Noize production company. Hailing from the predominantly black neighborhood of East Point, Georgia, and calling their collaboration “The Dungeon Family,” OutKast (Dre and Big Boi) and Goodie Mob (Cee-Lo, T-Mo, Big Gipp, and Khujo) embodied nearly all the influences that had defined East and West Coast rap in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet the music OutKast and Goodie Mob wrote for LaFace was not simply derivative. Thematically, they emphasized the peculiarities of southern black life and played up cultural differences between New York, Los Angeles, and Atlanta. Musically, the groups tapped into southern black music, particularly gospel, rock ’n’ roll, the blues, and Stax soul, mixing southern sounds with drawled deliveries. As a member of Goodie Mob noted, they embraced their southernness with aplomb: “We



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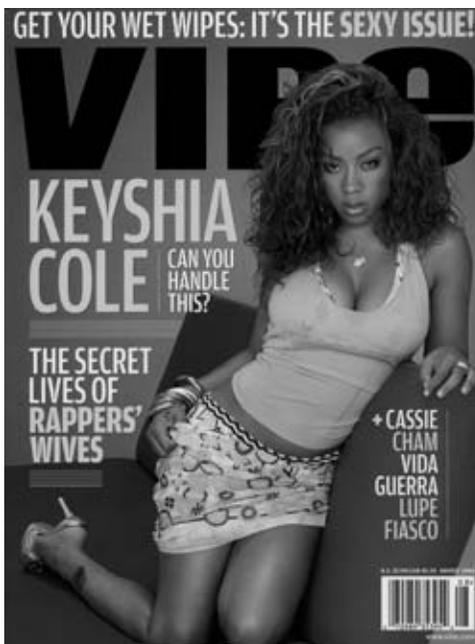
cut words off. We're lazy with our tongue. We really don't give a damn about your diction. . . . So, you know, you're going to have to rewind it a few times."<sup>6</sup>

By stressing such cultural markers, Goodie Mob and OutKast might deliver a message about black urban life similar to one delivered by an East or West Coast group, but *how* they delivered it made it sound unusual to outsiders. "We got the feel of the blues, the togetherness of funk music, the conviction of gospel music, the energy of rock and the improvisation of jazz," observed OutKast's Dre during one interview. "I don't want to put us out away from everything," he continued, "but our music sounds different. . . . You listen to East Coast music, it's got a kind of rhythm. You listen to West Coast, it's got its own kind of rhythm. You listen to southern music, it's got kind of like a bouncy feel to it. It's soul. That's what it is. It's soulful music with more instrumentation." LaFace's Reid agreed, claiming his rappers "tapped into the 'soul' of the 'soul music' I remember. . . . Their music has spirit. Southern spirit."<sup>7</sup>

In 1994 LaFace introduced the complexities of this southern spirit to the national rap market with the release of OutKast's first album, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*. Like the Parliament-inspired "G-funk" of West Coast gangsta rap, the album combined deep bass tones and laid-back, crawling beats to create an edgy yet playful sound that complemented Dre and Big Boi's lyrical tone. To an extent, the album continued rap music's pattern of glorifying violence, partying, and aggressive male sexuality, describing real "playas" as hyper-masculine men accustomed to "breakin' knees and elbows like I used to break my curfew" and "pimpin' way mo' hoes than there's peoples out in China." Still, OutKast reworked these rather standard themes, placing them in the context of southern living and the local

black culture of Atlanta. “The slang is in effect because it’s Georgia,” rapped Big Boi before he described his personal disillusionment with West Coast motifs: “Juice and gin [a drink made popular by West Coast rapper Snoop Dogg] used to be my friend, from the beginnin’ / And now I’m just a player sippin’ sauce [a codeine laced cocktail particular to southern club life].” Dre likewise lauded the superiority of southern culture in his rhymes, arguing, “Like collard greens and whole eggs / I got soul / That’s something you ain’t got / That’s why yo style is rotten.”<sup>8</sup>

More prominent than this stylistic posturing about regional difference was OutKast’s emphasis on why they considered themselves outcasts. For them, economic and social exclusion defined the Atlanta they portrayed on the album, as Dre noted when he invited listeners to “step in my Cadillac, let’s ride through the hood / Eh, why don’t you roll that window down so you can see it real good / And take a look at all the pimps and all the pushers and all the players / That’s livin’ on a whim, thin ice and a prayer.” Charged by this frustration, OutKast displayed an intense disdain for whitewashed versions of southern history and an especially acute hatred for Atlanta’s white elite, calling them “pussy motherfuckas” who wanted to “put that [confederate] flag up” but should “work a little bit faster / Because of the shit that I done been through / I shall never call you master / You D-E-V-I-L.” By highlighting local problems and bragging about how their experi-



*Although hip-hop magazines, such as Vibe and The Source, occasionally included interviews with southern artists or favorable reviews of southern rap albums, in the early days they usually did not give the Dirty South much more than passing coverage.*

ence as marginalized black southerners actually reinforced their superiority over the status quo, OutKast set up a nuanced definition of regional blackness that other LaFace artists, particularly Goodie Mob, explored further.<sup>9</sup>

As *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* climbed past platinum sales and critics praised it for being the first music that was “distinctly Atlantan,” Goodie Mob released *Soul Food* in late 1995, an album that reiterated many of the regionalized castings of urban black identity set out by OutKast. With the title of the album’s fourth track, Goodie Mob also popularized a term that defined the essence of Atlanta rap and eventually the entire southern rap industry. The song was called “Dirty South.”<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted that Goodie Mob did not coin this term. “Dirty South” had been in usage since the 1980s in the clubs of Atlanta, Houston, Miami, and other southern cities. In those contexts, the term most often had a sexual or criminal connotation, but on *Soul Food* Goodie Mob used it as an educational tool. For Goodie Mob, the South, in general—and Atlanta, in particular—was “dirty” because of its troubling racial history, its continuing record of black on black violence, and its corrupt judicial system. To hammer this point home, Goodie Mob related stories from the “dirtier” of Atlanta—mothers struggling to raise good kids, teenagers reflecting on their uncertain future, young adults troubled by gang life. The “ATL” was likewise “dirty” because it remained a segregated city run by “white devils” and “Clampetts,” who made Goodie Mob “wonder if the gate was put up to keep crime out or keep our ass in.” Still, though the obstacles were many, Goodie Mob believed that there was a reason to hope. By pulling together in black unity, blacks in Atlanta and around the Dirty South could turn the economic and social problems they faced into “food for my soul.”<sup>11</sup>

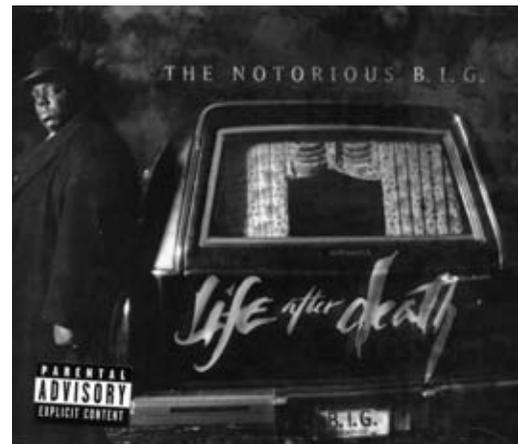
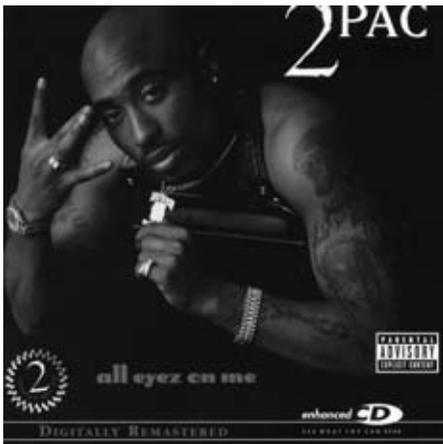
OutKast and Goodie Mob had received modest praise from music critics for their portrayals of black life on Atlanta’s margins, but despite such affirmation and the full support of LaFace’s promotional resources, they were still booed at the 1995 *Source* Awards and dismissed as interlopers rather than innovators. Both business interests and cultural values explain this intentional exclusion. Controlled by media conglomerates that only saw profits in promoting “legitimate” East or West Coast rap, New York and Los Angeles radio stations simply did not play OutKast, Goodie Mob, or other southern rappers. Hip-hop magazines such as *Vibe* and *The Source* occasionally included interviews with southern artists or favorable reviews of southern rap albums, but they usually did not give the Dirty South much more than passing coverage. At times, as Mississippi rapper David Banner remembered, the opposition to southern rappers could not be more direct:

I was backstage, 1993, at Freaknik. I was rapping with [East and West Coast rappers] Wu Tang Clan, Souls of Mischieff, Tribe Called Quest, it was so many people back then. You know, we all was going around the cycle [an improvised competition between several rappers], and I remember I ripped it. . . . And

they was like, “You gotta be from New York?” And I was like, “No.” “Okay, then, you from L.A.” “No.” “Okay, then Chicago?” I mean everybody standing around, okay, you know? “Okay, where you from then?” I told them I was from Mississippi. Everybody left.<sup>12</sup>

The reasons given by southern rappers for such personal and professional discrimination reveal much about how outsiders viewed the regional visions of black identity that OutKast and Goodie Mob presented. In a word, detractors cast Dirty South rap as “country,” an epithet in black culture roughly equivalent to white culture’s “redneck.” Nonsouthern critics wielded the term with delight, using it to describe how foreign the accents, music, and cultural emphases of southern rappers sounded in comparison to the East or West Coast style. Although the vast majority grew up in the city rather than in the country, to outsiders, all southern rappers seemed un-urban, unsophisticated, and “backwards.” As such, to be southern was to be considered “country” and thus unable to produce “real” rap, even if a rapper grew up in the roughest of urban ghettos. “People got different cultures, man,” noted Raheem, a legendary rapper in Atlanta, about his failed attempts to get airplay during the early 1990s. “[That was why] New York was getting played in Atlanta, but we couldn’t get played in New York.”<sup>13</sup>

As the 1990s progressed, however, the “country” stylings of southern rappers slowly became a credit rather than a constraint. The “southern spirit” that Reid promoted and nonsouthern rappers panned would soon turn into the Dirty South’s greatest asset, the key to what made Atlanta rap a fresh sound and a fresh



*Whether they were real hip-hopsters or not, many who had previously dissed Atlanta rap did start to listen. The violent deaths of Los Angeles’s Tupac Shakur in 1996 and New York’s Notorious B.I.G. in 1997 left rap devotees looking for new icons in hip-hop culture. Tupac Shakur’s All Eyes on Me (left), from Death Row Recordings LLC, and Notorious B.I.G.’s Life After Death (right), from Bad Boy Records.*

source for mass-market hip-hop culture. Indeed, regional identity as much as racial identity would make southern rap sell.

In 1996, backed again by Reid and LaFace Records, OutKast presented listeners with a striking redefinition of rap's musical and thematic boundaries via their second album, *ATLiens*. Though still inspired by the smooth, dark grooves that had grounded West Coast rap for a decade, *ATLiens* also featured a variety of musical styles previously considered "alien" to hip-hop. As Dre noted in an interview with *Mic Check* magazine, "We got tired of all hip-hop music being the same. . . . We don't set up no boundaries. Parliament was the same way; they didn't give a damn what they did. They used soul, rock, blues, R&B, and even hip-hop in there. They were all funky and now we're doing the same thing." As on their first album, OutKast glorified predominantly southern motifs that were also "alien" to nonsouthern listeners. As one reviewer observed, they rapped about "Cadillacs rather than Benzes, chicken wings rather than Moet." The album's title track even gave a classic rap refrain a decidedly southern twang as OutKast prodded listeners to "Throw yo hands in the ay-ur / And wave 'em like you just don't cay-ur / And if you like fish 'n' grits and all that pimp shit / Everybody let me hear you say oh-yay-yur!" Once more, OutKast tied such stylistic differences to the theme of exclusion, presenting southern blacks as "aliens" in their own cities and southern rappers as "aliens" to the rest of the rap industry. Dre and Big Boi's descriptions of "sittin' at the end of the month / I just made it" sympathized with the tight budgets of inner-city blacks in Atlanta and across America, while their descriptions of market marginalization in the mainstream rap industry summarized the opinion of numerous rappers from across the South: "My mind catches flashbacks to the black past. . . . The southern slang, figure ways and mojo chicken wangs / But I grew up on booty shake we did not know no better thang / So go 'head and diss it, while real hip-hoppers listen."<sup>14</sup>

Whether they were real hip-hoppers or not, many who had previously dissed Atlanta rap did start to listen as two factors combined to loosen the West and East coasts' grip on the market. First, the violent deaths of Los Angeles's Tupac Shakur in 1996 and New York's Notorious B.I.G. in 1997 left rap devotees looking for new icons in hip-hop culture. Second, the rap market was saturated with the music of both coasts, leaving fans weary of what seemed like a growing tendency for up-and-coming rappers to copycat rather than create. *ATLiens* benefited from this market malaise, debuting on *Billboard's* Top 200 chart at number two and earning a review from the watchdog of all things pop, *Rolling Stone* magazine. Calling the album "something all too rare in today's hip-hop nation," the magazine awarded OutKast four stars out of five for its ability to go beyond "the materialistic hedonism of much East Coast rap, and the gunplay and pimpism of its West Coast counterpart." The *Washington Post* called the album "generally

inventive, clever without being cloying” and proclaimed “that hip-hop innovation isn’t just an East-West thang”<sup>15</sup>

Two years later, OutKast’s third album, *Aquemini*, received another four-star approval from *Rolling Stone* and fulsome praise for “representing Atlanta to the fullest” and proving “that you don’t have to sell out to sell records.” *Aquemini*, by their estimation, had a “fresh, original feel” that defied “rap’s coastal clichés.” Equating their urban struggle with their fight to make a living in the music business, OutKast included a song on the album titled “Rosa Parks.” The song’s lyrics did not make direct reference to the civil rights icon, but it did express OutKast’s desire “to be like Rosa Parks and do the opposite of what everybody else was doing.” Built around a bridge that featured a foot-stomping, blues-harmonica solo, the song sounded unlike anything in late 1990s rap. Rosa Parks herself found the song’s explicit language and sexual references a defamation of character and sued OutKast, though a court later dismissed her charge as unwarranted. But Parks’s disapproval seemed to be the only criticism leveled against the song and the album. Reviewers for the *New York Times* deemed OutKast a “new power within hip-hop” and praised the group’s skillful mixing of “the cerebralness of New York rappers and the George Clinton–drenched funk favored out West with a



*OutKast’s meteoric rise led one observer to call Dirty South rap a regional innovation on the scale of the “doomed grandeur of Gone with the Wind.” The force, spirit, and messages of Dirty South rap lie in stark relief against old images of Scarlett and Mammy. From David O. Selznick’s Gone with the Wind, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.*

particularly Southern musicality, soulfulness, twang-drenched rhymes and Baptist churchlike euphoric joy.” The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* offered perhaps the most effusive endorsement of the group’s work, arguing that “OutKast . . . along with the other young artists of the extended ‘Dungeon Family’ probably constitute the most revolutionary musical development to have occurred in our town since Ray Charles walked into a Georgia Tech radio studio in 1955 and recorded ‘I Got a Woman.’”<sup>16</sup>

As L.A. Reid’s LaFace Records and the Dungeon Family attracted an increasingly widespread audience for their music, they also worked vigorously to redefine what constituted the “Dirty South.” This should not be seen as an unexpected turn, since Reid—and a growing number of both independent and major label producers—took seriously the potential for southern rap to compete in America’s pop-music market. During this shift, however, the real-life experiences of inner-city African Americans living in the post-civil rights South faded from articulations of what it meant to be black, southern, and a part of the “Dirty South.” Hence, between 1998 and 2004, Dirty South rap became less a cultural product of outcasts living in the invisible parts of Atlanta and more a renewed expression of that entrepreneurial, image-driven, all-inclusive city that was supposedly “too busy to hate.” As Atlanta’s mayor Bill Campbell put it, the business practices of LaFace and other local music leaders proved that “there is no Atlanta sound . . . unless, of course, you like the sound of money.”<sup>17</sup>

With their 1999 release, *World Party*, Goodie Mob took the first step toward a redefinition of the Dirty South, crafting music that they felt represented “no titles, no limitations, no restrictions, no separatism, one nation under a groove.” This push for universal appeal gave the album a strikingly different tone than their previous efforts. The problems of inner-city Atlanta seemed lost among all the invitations to “Let the music take your mind / leave the worries of the world behind” and “Get high, get fly, ’til you get it, getting’ by / Don’t switch, get krunk, get drunk, get rich.” Reviewers picked up on this new turn in Goodie Mob’s music. One critic wrote that, unlike their trademark anti-Clampett slams and engaging, journalistic stories about life on Atlanta’s hard streets, “*World Party* is the sound of wounded revolutionaries . . . [and] bad for the brain.” Concerned that Atlanta rap was losing its creative edge because Goodie Mob seemed to be saying, “We are all multiculturalists now,” another reviewer feared that the future of the Dirty South might one day leave its founders and fans wondering “what it is. Or ain’t. Or once was.”<sup>18</sup>

In 2000, however, OutKast and LaFace overwhelmed critics with *Stankonia*, an album that put behind any doubts about what direction Dre and Big Boi wanted the future to take. Unlike the unsteady *World Party*, *Stankonia* was a tour de force that successfully offered something new for everyone by skillfully coupling the southern slang and subject matter that made them famous with sounds taken

from as many musical styles as possible. It had its serious side—the hit single “Mrs. Jackson” discussed the difficulties of fame and fatherhood; another track entitled “Toilet Tisha” spoke honestly about teen pregnancy and suicide—but for the most part its tone was witty, approachable, and just plain cool. Listeners and reviewers found the result a satisfyingly different type of rap album. *Stankonia* sold 557,000 copies in the first week and 5,000,000 copies in the first year of its release. For the first time, mainstream radio stations supported OutKast’s album, airing tracks such as “Mrs. Jackson,” “So Fresh, So Clean,” and “B.O.B.” Music television channels BET and MTV put the group’s music videos on a continual rotation. The album’s meteoric rise even brought one observer to call Dirty South rap a regional innovation on the scale of “William Faulkner’s imaged Yoknapatawpha County. Robert Johnson’s smoky juke joints. The doomed grandeur of *Gone with the Wind*.” The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* judged *Stankonia* “a lyrical and musical standout that offers something substantial for fans of straight up-and-down rap, fiery guitar rock, on-the-porch blues and funk.” *USA Today* likewise found *Stankonia* difficult to classify, but this made it a welcome reinterpretation of rap music itself: “High energy first single B.O.B. draws from the quirky drum ‘n’ bass dance style, as well as country and heavy metal, but like all of OutKast’s music, it remains distinctly hip-hop. Its view of what hip-hop can be happens to be a little broader than almost everybody else’s.” Though reviewers waxed at length about the album’s musical offerings, OutKast had more than just artistry in mind. *Stankonia* was an all-out assault on the West and East Coast’s definition of “legitimate” rap music and their domination of America’s hip-hop-culture industry.



Equating “country” with “rural” allowed Bubba Sparxxx, a white ex-football player from LaGrange, Georgia, a certain level of legitimacy. Much like Field Mob, Bubba Sparxxx stressed his “country” background. Sparxxx’s *The Charm* (left), from Purple Ribbon Entertainment and New South Entertainment, and Field Mob’s *Light Poles and Pine Trees* (right), from Geffen Records.

For OutKast, *Stankonia*'s title might mean "the place from which all funky things come," but they also wanted the Dirty South to be the place from which all funky things would come in the future.<sup>19</sup>

After *Stankonia*, the Dirty South underwent another round of conceptual change in the face of its newfound status. No longer "the butt of jokes in the New York City/Los Angeles-dominated world of rap music," as one writer for *Ebony* put it, the success of OutKast's "country" style encouraged other rappers from around the South to define for themselves what it meant to be "dirty" and "southern." This led to an altogether new development in American rap music's history: the legitimization of rappers from nonurban locales. In Georgia, Field Mob, a rap duo from Ray Charles's hometown of Albany, took up a literal interpretation of "country," emphasizing their roots in the rural, "filthy, nasty, dirty South." They were proud to come from what they considered the most "country" place in the Dirty South, a place where "field boys" rolled with "the watermelon, beer can, and peaches." In at least one instance, such an equation of "country" with "rural" also allowed a white, ex-football player from LaGrange, Georgia, a certain level of legitimacy. Much like Field Mob, Bubba Sparxxx stressed his "country" background, albeit for different reasons. With his 2001 debut album *Dark Days, Bright Nights*, Sparxxx attempted to remind his listeners that the rural South suffered from the same problems of economic deprivation and social exclusion that troubled the region's urban ghettos. Hence, he called his style of rural rap "New South" because he imagined it "to be a unifying force in the region, carrying the South past racism, divisiveness, and rural backwardness." Sparxxx, however, had a peculiar formula for attaining his goal. *Dark Days, Bright Nights* coupled hip-hop beats with the sounds of banjos and cows mooing while the video for the album's only single presented "visuals of hip-hop by featuring farm tractors, people in bib overalls and pig wrestling." Still, by expressly linking rural identity to regional identity, Sparxxx exemplified the flexibility of the Dirty South's "country" motif and, as Field Mob rapped, its ability to spark pride in the notion that "the southern way, no other way . . . there's no better way to live."<sup>20</sup>

While rural rappers redrew the conceptual boundaries of the Dirty South, an important shift in the industry's organizational make-up ensured Atlanta's longevity as a "go-to spot" for mass-market rap. In 2000 L.A. Reid accepted Arista Records' offer to become its C.E.O., and LaFace was absorbed into Arista. LaFace left Atlanta in the same year, creating what one business analyst called "a conspicuous absence of an apparent leader in the city's industry." A collection of independent labels quickly filled this void left by LaFace's departure. Since the early days of Atlanta rap, these "indies" had constituted a supportive structure for nurturing local talent. At this point, however, they developed closer ties to the broader market opened up by LaFace and OutKast. "Independent labels are coming from the grass roots," noted one observer, "and they learn how to market

and promote their artists. . . . They [the indies] are the ones testing new grounds and making new things work.” Indies also offered something that “major” labels like Arista, Atlantic, and Columbia could not consistently guarantee—greater artistic license and the potential for higher returns, sometimes substantially more than a major label’s offer, on every CD or tape sold. As one rapper observed, the generous terms of many indie contracts meant that “[major labels] can’t come down here thinking we’re so happy to get a deal. We’re not always so *happy* to get a deal.” Still, despite the questionable reputation of major labels, many rappers did want mainstream fame and mainstream money, and indies proved a reliable stepping stone to major label deals. This complex relationship between indies and major labels, and the sometimes fierce competition between them for talent, had a profound effect on the notion of the Dirty South, encouraging rappers to reinterpret continually their now profitable southernness. By claiming to represent persistently fresh takes on what defined the Dirty South, a steady stream of rappers hoping to cash in on Atlanta’s growing popularity repeatedly recast the Dirty South in their own image. No doubt, rural rappers like Field Mob and Bubba Sparxxx benefited from this new conceptual and organizational framework. The most obvious benefactor, however, were the promoters of “crunk.”<sup>21</sup>

Unlike the cerebral rap of Goodie Mob and OutKast, or the “country-fried” pursuits of rural rappers, crunk was urban party music. Frenetic, bass-heavy, and



*With his 2001 debut album Dark Days, Bright Nights, Bubba Sparxxx attempted to remind his listeners that the rural South suffered from the same problems of economic deprivation and social exclusion that troubled the region’s urban ghettos. Photograph courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.*

fashioned around a revivalistic pattern of call and response, crunk music was “designed to make you wild out in the club.” Lil Jon & the East Side Boyz, an Atlanta crunk group, had much to do with crunk’s popularization. Like his music, Lil Jon played fast and loose with his southernness; his 2001 release *Put Yo Hood Up* even showed Lil Jon and his group wrapped in Confederate flags on the cover. Lil Jon was also a savvy salesman, aiming his music directly at the widening audience Atlanta rappers garnered after 2000. As the charismatic, self-proclaimed “king of crunk,” whose infectious yawns of “Ye-YAY-uh!!!” soon became the ubiquitous catchword of the crunk style, Lil Jon quickly attracted the attention of major labels and radio stations. By 2003 labels from New York and California searched from Virginia to Texas for crunk artists and any other talented southern rapper who proved to be a creative interpreter of the Dirty South, frequently signing them after they showed promise via sales for independent labels. The results were often similar to OutKast’s initial rise to prominence—millions of albums sold to an increasingly broad fan base.<sup>22</sup>

What fans bought was not quite the Dirty South of old, but the music and image of a new Dirty South. In the wake of *Stankonia*, the most popular albums and artists less often equated the Dirty South with life in Atlanta, black struggle, white racism, economic difficulties, or other complicated social questions. Most still connected the Dirty South to a general sense of pride in being southerners, reasserting the theme OutKast had put forth on *Aquemini* that “you might call us country / but we’s only southern.” Or, as Atlanta’s Killer Mike put it, “Before I’m a Georgian, before I’m an Atlantan, I’m a southerner. . . . If we cotton pickers, what better thing to be?” Beyond this affirmation of southern identity, however, southern rappers varied greatly on the specifics of what made the Dirty South “dirty” and “southern.” Some, like the Ying Yang Twins and other crunk rappers, equated the Dirty South almost exclusively with party music and Atlanta’s nightclub culture. Others, like Nappy Roots, a group from western Kentucky that recorded several self-released demos and much of their major-label debut, *Watermelon, Chicken, and Gritz*, in Atlanta, favored rural overtones and defined the Dirty South as “country boys on the rise.” Harkening back to the thematic influence of Miami bass music, Atlanta radio DJ-turned-rapper Ludacris interpreted the Dirty South as mostly about sex and getting “Dirty South girls / give me Dirty South head.” In a sense, the “Dirty South” had become whatever a rapper wanted it to be as long as, of course, that rapper was from somewhere in the South.<sup>23</sup>

This free-floating, loosely bound, inclusive aspect of the Dirty South made it easily integrated into what hip-hop critic Selwyn Seyfu Hinds has called the “great American culture sale.” Hence, the “Dirty South” after 2000 also became a type of trademark, a recognizable market identity used to sell a variety of pop culture commodities. OutKast, shortly after releasing *Stankonia*, founded OutKast Clothing, an apparel company intended to compete with other cloth-



*Crunk music was “designed to make you wild out in the club.”*

*Lil Jon & the East Side Boyz, an Atlanta crunk group, had much to do with crunk’s popularization, and Lil Jon even teamed up with an energy drink company to release Crunk!!!, a beverage “sort of like Red Bull, except with three exclamation points.” Lil Jon & the East Side Boyz’s Kings of Crunk, from BME Recordings and T.V.T. Records.*

ing lines founded by West Coast rappers like Snoop Dogg and East Coast rap magnates Russell Simmons and Sean Combs. Commenting on the look and feel of the clothing, OutKast Clothing’s vice president called it “urban Versace. It’s that combination, because the two of them [Dre and Big Boi] wear that look and it’s easier to showcase that.” Wasting no time, Lil Jon teamed up with an energy drink company to release Crunk!!!, a drink “sort of like Red Bull, except with three exclamation points.” The Dirty South’s market even stretched into the publishing world. By 2004 its appeal led to the first publication of *Crunk*, a magazine devoted totally to Dirty South rap, as well as the first pulp novel inspired by the genre, a “story of rap world murder and duplicity” titled *Dirty South* by mystery writer Ace Atkins.<sup>24</sup>

The fervency with which southern rappers used the various meanings of the Dirty South left some followers of southern rap dismayed. Some debated whether the “outcast” and “country” motif still encouraged creativity or was merely a marketing gimmick. Others argued that Dirty South music simply southernized stereotypes already pervasive in mass-market rap. Writing about Bubba Sparxxx and other rural rappers, one reviewer noted that “Sparxxx and his team ruthlessly milk the stereotypes, but then, how many rappers milk the thug stereotype? At least this one hasn’t been done to death (although the image of the drunken, sex-starved, trash-talking, shotgun-toting rural redneck isn’t far removed from the drunken, sex-starved, trash-talking, handgun-toting urban thug).” Concerned about rappers and their endorsement of numerous consumer goods, another reviewer concluded that the Dirty South now embodied all the problems plaguing hip-hop culture in general: “Now, they [industry leaders] create it, package it and

market it. . . . It has nothing to do with the streets. It's mythological. It's fake. And it's soulless. It'll be interesting to see what happens when the hype wears off and the energy-drink industry starts crashing. Then what? OutKast's Low Carb Cheesecake?"<sup>25</sup>

Whether Dirty South rappers will jump into the health-food market in the future cannot be predicted, but what seems certain is that Atlanta has indeed "southernized" hip-hop America, establishing itself as the commercial center of one of the most influential and lucrative pop-culture industries in contemporary America. In record sales alone, observed one Atlanta rapper in 2004, "we're responsible for over 250 million records sold . . . in the last three or four years. . . . Nobody in New York, nobody in California did that. Nobody together did that. The South did that." The Dirty South also did much more, taking its place alongside other hip-hop-inspired brand names on the nation's retail shelves, thus ensuring that everybody might become a little "dirty" and "southern" with the spin of a record or the swig of an energy drink. Viewed in this context, OutKast's big night at the Grammy Awards was not just the culmination of a few rappers' efforts but also the arrival of an entire industry. What OutKast and the Dirty South industry were being honored for, however, was a concept, an image, a depiction of southern identity that had grown to obscure the very real social and economic problems that continue to define the dirty side of Atlanta, the South, and America. It is in this sense that the Dirty South showed that it not only had something to say for itself. It also had a great deal to say about racial identity, regional identity, and the selling of both in modern America.<sup>26</sup>

#### NOTES

I would like to thank James C. Cobb, Laura Mason, Ichiro Miyata, Antar Fields, Michael Barnes, Kyra Gaunt, and Jennifer Grem for critiquing earlier drafts of this essay.

This essay focuses primarily on how Atlanta developed a regional rap industry that could capture the mainstream popular music market. Hence, it undoubtedly overlooks or downplays nightclub culture as well as other vestiges of the "underground," such as independent radio stations, record companies, mix-tape dealers, and local record shops. This omission should not be taken as a slight but as a decision made for the sake of focusing on a different set of questions about identity in the mass market.

1. *The Dirty States of America: The Untold Story of Southern Hip-Hop* (Image Entertainment, 2004), videorecording.

2. Tamara Palmer, *Country-Fried Soul: Adventures in Dirty South Hip-Hop* (Backbeat Books, 2005), 16; OutKast, *Aquemini* (LaFace Records, 1998).

3. Nelson George, *Hip-Hop America* (Penguin Press, 1998).

4. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Robin D. G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles" in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. William Eric Perkins (Temple University Press, 1995) 117–58; Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes*

*First: Race, Space, and Place in Hip Hop* (Wesleyan University Press, 2002); Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

5. Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (Verso Press, 1996), 86; Larry Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class and Urban Expansion* (Temple University Press, 2001), 41–68; James C. Cobb, “The Sunbelt South: Industrialization in Regional, National, and International Perspective,” in *Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region*, ed. Raymond A. Mohl (University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 32; Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 53–92, 221–60; Clarence N. Stone, *Economic Growth and Neighborhood Discontent: System Bias in the Urban Renewal Planning Program of Atlanta* (University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 25–41, 45–56, 130–85.

6. “Corporate Profile for LaFace Records,” *Business Wire*, 13 October 1995; “The Man Behind LaFace,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 19 June 1994, 1–N, 5–N; “L.A.’ Confidential: Reid of LaFace Goes on the Record,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 2 July 2000, 4–K; *Dirty States*, videorecording.

7. “Hip Hop’s New Direction,” *Washington Post*, 5 March 2000, 1–G; “Welcome Noize,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 14 November 1995, 1–D. “The Dungeon Family” was a reference to the bond that members of OutKast and Goodie Mob developed while recording some of their first collaborations together in producer Rico Wade’s basement.

8. OutKast, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* (LaFace Records, 1994).

9. *Ibid.*

10. “Album Reviews,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 7 May 1994, 21–L. Goodie Mob’s name was intended to remind listeners of the dangers of the gangsta lifestyle and the social problems of Atlanta’s black community. It was a collection of abbreviations taken from their mantra, “The GOOD die young, M(ostly) O(ver) B(ullshit).”

11. This emphasis on white racism obviously overlooks the biracial coalition that Clarence Stone has identified as the source for the city’s “regime politics.” It is uncertain why Goodie Mob did not address more explicitly the participation of some blacks in building and maintaining this regime; Clarence N. Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946–1988* (University Press of Kansas, 1989). Goodie Mob, *Soul Food* (LaFace Records, 1995); for a musicological treatment of *Soul Food*, see Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 123–51.

12. *Dirty States*, videorecording. Originally a reunion party for the city’s black fraternities, Freaknik was an enormously popular black festival held annually in Atlanta during the 1980s and 1990s. It was also known as “Black Beach Week” and “Black Mardi Gras.”

13. *Ibid.* For more on the engagement of southern blacks with their identity as southerners, see James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford University Press), 261–87.

14. *Mic Check Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 6 [online], <http://www.eagleson.com/hiphop/outkast/article4.htm>; OutKast, *ATLiens* (LaFace Records, 1996).

15. Kevin Powell, “Review: *ATLiens*,” *Rolling Stone*, 31 October 1996, 66–67; “OutKast: ‘ATLiens’ from Hip-Hop Planet,” *Washington Post*, 11 October 1996, 11–N.

16. S. H. Fernando Jr., “Review: *Aquemini*,” *Rolling Stone*, 1 October 1998, 66; “Atlanta’s OutKast Can Back Up Their Hip-Hop Boasts,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 19 March 1999, 16; “Suit on Song, ‘Rosa Parks,’ is Rejected,” *New York Times*, 19 November 1999, 28–A; “The Hip-Hop Nation: Whose Is It?” *New York Times*, 22 August 1999, 1–B, 28–B; “In Atlanta, It’s Hip to Be Proud,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 18 May 1999, 2–C.

17. “In the New South, an Heir to Motown,” *New York Times*, 8 March 1998, 2–B, 35–B. For more on Atlanta’s preferred image of itself, see Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 12–71; a scholarly critique of this mythic image can be found in Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

18. Rhonda Baraka, "Comin' Right Up," *Billboard*, 11 December 1999, 28; Jon Caramanica, "Back That Mass Up," *Village Voice*, 22 February 2000, 129–30.
19. "Hip-Hop's New Direction," *Washington Post*, 5 March 2000, 1–G, 6–G; "OutKasts No More," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 4 April 2001, 1–D; "Stankonia Drives OutKast into Uncharted Territory," *USA Today*, 31 October 2000, 1–D.
20. "Southern Fried Hip-Hop," *Ebony*, 59.3 (January 2004): 74; Field Mob, *From Ashby to Classy* (Arista Records, 2001); Chuck Campbell, "Bubba Sparxxx Needs More Voltage," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 2 November 2001, 18; "New South Rap," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 3 May 2002, 3–P.
21. Rhonda Baraka, "Despite the Defection of LaFace Records Atlanta's Music Community Says It's Still a Thriving, Musically Fertile Place to Be" *Billboard*, 19 October 2002, 82; *Dirty States*, videorecording.
22. "Atlanta Rapper Cranking Out 'Crunk' from Coast to Coast," *Advocate*, 1 August 2003.
23. *Dirty States*, videorecording; Ying Yang Twins, *Me & My Brother* (TVT Records, 2003); Nappy Roots, *Watermelon, Chicken and Gritz* (Atlantic Records, 2002); Ludacris, *Back for the First Time* (Def Jam, 2000).
24. Selwyn Seyfu Hinds, "The Takeover: Hip-Hop and the Great American Culture Sale," *Razor*, 4.10 (October 2004): 69–73; Elena Romero, "Music's New Fashion Wave," *Business and Industry*, 9 February 2001, 12; "Lil Jon Gets Crowd Crunk to Celebrate New CD," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 18 November 2004, 1–F; "Southern Living and Dying," *Washington Post*, 5 April 2004, 2–C; "Crunk!!! Energy Drink – Lil Jon King of Crunk," <http://www.crunkenergydrink.com>; Ace Atkins, *Dirty South* (Harper Collins, 2004). For more on the complicated relationship between rap music, consumer culture, and popular appeal, see Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Duke University Press, 2004), 191–203.
25. Campbell, "Bubba Sparxxx Needs More Voltage," 18; Audra Schroeder, "Throw Your Cans in the Air," *New Times Broward-Palm Beach*, 19 August 2004, <http://www.newtimesbpb.com/issues/2004-08-19/music/earache.html>.
26. *Dirty States*, videorecording.