

The \$uicideboy\$, Photo courtesy of Max Beck [@maxbeck.net]



DIRTY SOUTH RAP

**The Most Known Unknown
Sound of Hip-Hop**
Marcus Cortez

"The South got something to say!"

Hip-Hop artist Andre 3000 of the Atlanta-based duo Outkast made this declaration at the Source Awards in 1995 as he accepted the award for best new artist. His announcement was met with aggressive boos from the audience. In the mid-90s, during an East and West Coast rap battle, critics viewed the Dirty South Rap scene as a glorification of backwardness and destructiveness. The crowd was jealous and resentful of a southern hip-hop duo getting recognition. The hip-hop genre began to dominate the music industry in the 1990s. At the time, rappers of California on the West Coast and rappers of New York on the East Coast split the genre into two sounds. With G-funk in the West and boom bap

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in the East, these two styles fought for top spots on radio, billboard charts, and eyes of the public. But while this music war was going on, the southern region of the U.S. started to creep up with their own unique take on rap. Cities like Houston, Memphis, Atlanta, and New Orleans slowly crept onto the scene, and in doing coined the label of the Dirty South. The Dirty South introduced a new perspective to the rap scene. It went against the mainstream themes of the West and East and promoted a sense of carelessness against an empire state of mind.

The Dirty South is a unique sound defined by its violent lyrics, slowed-down vocals, and harsh instrumentals. Coined in a 1995 song titled "Dirty South" by the Atlanta-based group Goodie Mob, the term "Dirty South" became the name

labeled with the southern region in Hip-Hop. The name came from the region as it "was 'dirty' because of its troubling racial history, its continuing record of black-on-black violence, and its corrupt judicial system" (Grem). This history is reflected in the music's references to the southern cities being filled with violence, drug activity, and crime. Dirty South artists painted a grimy and depressive picture of the South. Music journalist Matt Miller describes the music style as representing the "already familiar stereotypes of the South as variously backwards, abject, slow, corrupt..." (Miller). The unique aspect of the Dirty South was that its music was not made for the mainstream. It was not laid back. It contained very arrogant, lustful, wrathful, and drug addicted themes. From its heavy-hitting beats and

drugged-out sound to its violent lyrics, it created a rap scene not made for the casual listener. Songs like "Pimp Tha Pen" by DJ Screw (Released in 1995), "Now I'm High, Really High" by Three 6 Mafia (Released in 1999), and "Pinky Ring" by UGK (Released in 1996) are a great introduction to the genre. Artists like UGK emphasize arrogance and carelessness.

The roots of Dirty South rap, as we recognize it today, can be traced back to the 1990s, kickstarted by Three 6 Mafia's debut album *Mystic Stylez*, which helped lay the blueprint for the genre. This sound emerged due to this dangerous period in Memphis, which had a soaring crime rate and a "record of 213 homicides in 1993" (Action News 5). Similarly rising crime rates in places like New York and Compton, California caused artists to emerge

with music as an escape from real life. Three 6 Mafia and the Dirty South as a whole created a path for the romanticization of destruction towards community and themselves. Three 6 Mafia regularly contained lyrics like "Demonic mind, why must I love to take so many lives?" painting a vivid controversial portrait of the crime-ridden lifestyle with themes of satanism, drug abuse, and violence. In the words of Memphis rapper 8-Ball, it was a depiction of "young, cocaine-snorting, gangsta-ass Memphis s**t, There's no God. It's all debauchery" (The Southern Lab). This path caused divergence in the rap scene between the three regions. While West Coast rappers gravitated towards the G-funk genre characterized by its soulful and funk-infused melodies that paid homage to an earlier

Three 6 Mafia emphasizes the violent nature and self-destructiveness. DJ Screw emphasizes drug use and experimental sounds. These three artists helped launch this new subgenre in its beginnings.

A deeper look into the intro verse of one of these songs, "Now I'm High, Really High," reveals themes of extreme drug abuse, satanism, and homicidal tendencies. The first verse of the song shows listeners the paranoia and near-psychosis that Lord Infamous describes from the effects of his drug abuse: "The indo's creating illusions. The substance infesting my brain cell is causing confusion. I picture Teflon in slow motion. Its piercing through flesh and continues to cruising." Continuing, Lord Infamous uses conflicting words and emotions, a sense of his mindset fighting against itself: "Wait think straight, don't haste, paste, penetrate. Face, ace, sake, place, base, damn I think I'm crazed." Further, due to his mind state effected by substances, he dives into themes of terror and aggression, referencing satanism, when he says, "Terrors the error, no errors within my terror. Are you scared of 6, double S'six demonically elegant elements. A manic-depressive aggressiveness,

stress me b**ch. And you will feel the strength of my weapons kick." While Lord Infamous shows apathy towards victims, he continues in the song showing that his only care is substances: "Trickery, hickory dickory dock, I smoke top notch bud crop drop. The D, the O, the P, the E, I need the B, the L, the U-N-T. Because that green power flower got much love." The closing lines tie back into the title of the song and some of the core themes of the Dirty South. The lifestyle and single aspiration of the rappers to continue to destroy themselves and things around them through violence and a downward spiral of drug abuse can be seen in the following lyrics: "I tell you don't f**k with the triple six man cause you know that we on them drugs. Damn, I'm going off with this blunt outer space rock. Lord Infamous, I keep clouds of smoke flying out my mouth." While there are many songs, "Now I'm High, Really High" is a great example of the key differences of the Dirty South compared to West and East coast rap. The Dirty South embodies a raw, unapologetic culture within Hip-Hop, characterized by its blunt lyricism and aggressive delivery.

musical era, the East Coast embraced boom bap, a sub-genre distinguished by its straightforward beats, providing a simple way for lyrical expression. Whether recording in a studio or freestyling on a park bench, these musicians served up a unifying message for urban communities. The West and East were tied together as regions in which music was made with ambitious themes about improving themselves and their community. Comparatively, the Dirty South was a region seen as vulgar, a portrayal of a debauchorous lifestyle that faced heavy criticism due to its lyrics.

But it wasn't just the lyrics that defined the Dirty South's differences with the West and East. The themes of the Dirty South lyrics set the music in contrast to popular rap of the East and West coast. The Dirty South defies the mainstream. It opposed the vibes of the West and the East. Instead, it dove into themes of extreme drug use, violence, and isolation, a motif that New Orleans duo \$uicideboy\$ continues with in the 2010s being influenced by the Dirty South artists from the 90s. This can be heard and seen with \$uicideboy\$'s gritty verses and seen in member Scrim's verse from their 2016 track "Marlboros & White Widow." In the opening lines of this track, Scrim boasts of his use of extreme substances, making fun of the drug choices of others: "Pop up then I light up. You f**king boys ain't drugging. Gave up lean and Sprite cause. That heroin keeps me ducking." As the verse continues, it dives deeper into themes of isolation and distaste for human life: "F**k you know 'bout me Woe? I isolate

from all you f**kers. Nine up in the peep-hole. Been plotting on you undercover." In the closing lines, Scrim creates a picture of himself as a disturbed individual spiraling into evil ideologies with his only concerns in life being to get a fix of his next high: "Uzi roll the spliff up. Pain pills give me hiccups. Don't nothing make me sicker when I. Ain't got my f**king fix, bruh. Satan resurrected. That evil one king of the sixes. Schizo with depression. PCP laced on my swisher." With Scrim's verse, \$uicideboy\$ shows the listener the harsh realities of addiction and mental destruction, continuing the themes of Dirty South rap and pushing boundaries into darker territories. The Dirty South's music paints a clear picture of violence and self-destruction, a huge departure from the aspirational themes of their counterparts of the West and East. With the creation of G-funk, in the West, with its thematic picture of California's lifestyle through what Kendrick Lamar dubs the "3 W's" in his 2012 song "The Recipe," "women, weed and weather... Welcome to LA." From 2Pac to Kendrick Lamar, each G-funk anthem aimed to create a scene of riding along in a topless car, seeing the wind and smoke clouds mixed together blowing along the beach with everyone getting a summer tan. On the other side, the East Coast embodies the "empire state of mind" visualized by Jay-Z's ambitious lyrics in his 1996 track "Can't Knock The Hustle," when he says, "Cause you can't knock the hustle. But though you think you are. Baby one day you'll be a star." This is a call to hustle and gain a billionaire status. But despite the two coasts seeing success with these

themes, the Dirty South refused to follow in the footsteps of the West and East, carving out its unique take on hip-hop. While the West and East Coast reign supreme in critical acclaim and mainstream success, the Dirty South remains unapologetically true to its roots, slowly earning respect for its gritty authenticity.

The Dirty South revolutionized not only rap lyricism but also reshaped the production of the genre. Unlike its coastal counterparts, the Dirty South forged its path, characterized by a distinct production style. The Dirty South embraced a production style of being raw, obnoxious, and unapologetically loud, mirroring the intensity of its lyrics. Continuing to experiment more, the Dirty South pushed boundaries even further with the introduction of the chopped and screwed technique of DJ Screw. This production style is used to break up samples, creating a disjointed, unpredictable rhythm, called the "chopped" style which is combined with the "screwed" aspect, which was defined as slowing down the tempo and vocals that gave the result of a disorienting and hypnotic sound, mirroring the effects of being under the influence of the drugs used in the South. The West, on the other hand, focused on a production style of G-Funk that music journalist Imaan Yousuf defines as "Characterized most distinctly by the sampling of 1970s

funk music particularly that of combined group Parliament-Funkadelic" (Yousuf). This sampling gave a happy and danceable backbone to West Coast rap music. The East Coast followed the production style of Boom Bap, mainly defined as a style by its use of bass and kick drums. Key producers like Adam Yauch, DJ Premier, RZA, and many more aimed for this style to have an ear worm effect similar to a guitar riff in a rock song. This effect, along with the lyrical content, furthered the distance of the Dirty South from the mainstream. The Dirty South's production style offers listeners a unique experience that is vastly different from the West and East production styles.

As the 90s transitioned into the 2000s, the coast-to-coast beef ended. The West and East mixed together with many new artists from the Midwest and took the reins of hip-hop. This created more distance between the regions, as rap can be seen as those in the South versus those not in the South. Despite this change, the Dirty South maintained its core themes. The 2000s saw hip-hop shifting into solely club and radio hits, emphasizing sounds consisting of electronic and pop influence. In 2003, the hip-hop and pop production duo, The Neptunes, were "responsible for a full 43 percent of songs played on the radio" (Campbell). While mainstream artists followed this

trend, the Dirty South artists once again took this style and put their spin on it. Artists in the South created the sub-genre of Crunk. As West Coast and East Coast artists took to the club to be secluded in the V.I.P sections while going through expensive bottles of champagne, the Dirty South, however, as journalist Matt Miller describes, "strove to produce the kind of music appropriate to a rowdy, collective, and embodied experience" (Miller), making music where the Dirty South was within the crowd shouting anthems to promote high, aggressive energy. Chants like Three 6 Mafia's "Tear the club up!"; Crime Mob's "Knuck if you buck boy!"; and Baby D's "ATL Hoe!" helped define Crunk. These created a style which pushed aggressive pride in representing the Dirty South into the clubs.

Additionally, someone who has never heard a single song from the Dirty South and is not familiar with the sounds can physically see its uniqueness from its visuals. Visually, artists of the Dirty South represented themselves by wearing long chains and clothes two sizes too big, by riding in Cadillacs or other Chevy cars, and by walking around with 40oz bottles of Malt Liquor or a double Styro-foam cups. These small things are associated with the Dirty South rap culture. Even the visual album covers from the South have a very distinct style of bad photoshop, clip art, and random images that have no correlation with the music in order to show a difference from mainstream music. This artistic style is a great contrast to an East Coast album like Jay-Z's 2001 *The Blueprint*, where Jay-Z is



seen in a suit and smoking a cigar, giving a mafioso and professional visual, or the West with Kendrick Lamar's 2015 *To Pimp A Butterfly*, which shows Kendrick and a posse posing in front of the White House flaunting money and champagne. Both of these albums have a very professional photographic look to them with clean and simple covers. Conversely, the Dirty South presented projects like DJ Screw's 1996 *3'N The Mornin Part Two*, which had an ugly CGI skull as the cover, or \$uicideboy's *Yin Yang Tapes* that goes so overboard with clip art that it contains random images of dogs, guns, and even a Popeyes sign purposely making it look like an image from an average high school bathroom wall. In addition to the off-putting look, its visual style also reflects the core themes of the style: that the music is authentic, that even the album art isn't done by suits or professionals, and that the artists themselves use photoshop and CGI to create their own vision without having the budget to hire a professional. It was musicians creating their brand and image all on their own. Dirty South culture wasn't a product of corporate influence. It emerged promoting authenticity and raw expression.

However, as time progressed, another shift occurred in the late 2000s into the 2010s. The Dirty South's culture slipped into the hands of corporate labels and mainstream interests. This caused some inauthentic copies of the Dirty South to reach mainstream success with the biggest example being modern-day Trap music. While bearing resemblances to Dirty South culture through its simi-

lar themes of drug use and violence, as well as similar sounds of heavy 808s and hypnotic instrumentals, Trap music is seen as the bastard child of the Dirty South. Music website Rate Your Music describes Trap as having "its roots in Southern Hip Hop, Dirty South specifically." Despite having its roots in, and being influenced by the Dirty South, the core themes of the Dirty South, such as authenticity, anti-materialism, and going against the mainstream, are ignored in Trap music. Trap artists will consume the dirty drugs like lean but instead flaunt it in luxury cars. They are seen covered in designer apparel, a big departure from the authentic and gritty fashion in the Dirty South. Trap music often sounds the same with very few artists trying to experiment with the sound and evolve it further, unlike Dirty South artists who sought to create something new with every project. Unfortunately, Trap artists have gained more widespread attention and success than Dirty South Rap ever did from the 90s and 2000s even to the present day. Nevertheless, amidst this commercialization, many modern artists such as Freddie Dredd, Lil Ugly Mane, Germ, \$uicideboy\$, and Denzel Curry continue in keeping the authentic themes of the Dirty South alive from its music and artists creating their own image on their terms. Unfortunately, many listeners remain oblivious to this and do not realize the Dirty South's heavy influence on modern rap music, but its elements continue to shine through as newer artists show respect for the Dirty South traditions.

The Dirty South is the most unique



subgenre in the rap scene, sparking massive influence into modern mainstream rap culture. Even though it was not widely accepted in its beginnings, being the afterthought in a coast-to-coast hip-hop war, it has gained a solid reputation by listeners as having an authentic image and sound in hip-hop. In the 90s, artists like Three 6 Mafia, UGK, DJ Screw, Goodie Mob, and Outkast opened the door to southern hip-hop to make sure that their voices were heard and to keep music real to oneself and the environment they come from. Modern rap currently sees some inauthentic copies of the core values of the Dirty South, but a few modern artists continue to preserve the true heritage of the Dirty South scene. However, despite its heavy influence, the Dirty South has been deeply overlooked and misunderstood in its beginnings and hasn't been given the full respect in the modern mainstream that it deserves. The South had something to say, but the mainstream didn't want to listen.

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