

Revisiting the Legacy of the 1992 LA Riots

Gang Truces, Cross-Racial Resistance, and the Music They Inspired

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On March 3, 1991, Los Angeles police officers ran down a taxi driver, pursuing him with several police cars and a police helicopter on the grounds that he was speeding and would not pull over. They cornered him, then tasered him and beat him with batons for several minutes. His name was Rodney King. A local camcorder owner, George Holliday, caught some of the police violence on video. On April 29, 1992, a jury acquitted the officers who had assaulted King; even the mayor expressed disbelief. South Central Los Angeles erupted into riots and looting that continued for five days and spread to many other cities. In response, the National Guard, the Infantry, and the Marines joined the police in brutalizing residents of Los Angeles; for example, in one instance, as a consequence of an apparent misunderstanding, US Marines fired over 200 rounds into a house occupied by a woman and several children.

Despite all this repressive violence, many participants remember the riots as a high point of joyous community spirit. The riots demonstrated a way of coming together outside the divisions imposed by white supremacy and the capitalist distribution of wealth; they ignited a renaissance of creative anti-cop activity. In 2018, we look back to them as an important episode of the long legacy of struggles against the police that continues with the uprisings in Ferguson, Oakland, Baltimore, and elsewhere.

To observe the 26-year anniversary of the riots, let's revisit some of the unruly music they inspired.

At the opening of the 1990s, gangster rap had not yet been degraded into a consumer product for predominantly white suburban youth. An associate of Public Enemy and other explicit advocates of black power, Ice-T epitomized the early spirit of gangster rap. Before the LA riots, he had already recorded the controversial song "Cop Killer" with his thrash band Body Count, to the frothing dismay of then-President George Bush, Vice President Dan Quayle, and Al Gore's wife, Tipper.

However, few remember that after the riots, Ice-T collaborated with fellow Los Angeles residents Slayer, among the world's most notorious metal musicians, to put the rage and chaos of the riots on tape. Together, they recorded a medley of three songs off "Troops of Tomorrow," the second and arguably best album by Scottish punk mainstays The Exploited, updating the lyrics to deal with the conditions in Los Angeles that produced the upheaval. The Exploited song "UK 82," for example, became "LA 92."

Mind you, Slayer is in the doghouse with us—we still remember their cover of Minor Threat’s “Guilty of Being White.” But if they could have shut the fuck up and simply served as a backing band for Ice-T, music history could have played out differently. This collaboration between rebels from distinct yet overlapping musical styles and communities exemplifies the promise of the riots that the conflicts between racial groups could give way to a shared struggle against the authorities.¹

This song by Kam spells out the same message about the riots: “It wasn’t just the blacks—everyone was looting and had each other’s backs.” Kam also emphasizes the importance of the gang truce that preceded the uprising in setting the stage for the oppressed of Los Angeles to rise up together. On April 26, three days before the Rodney King verdict, Bloods and Crips arranged a historic ceasefire in South Central Los Angeles. The story is documented in Jeff Chang’s excellent *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, which also offers a play-by-play account of the riots themselves.

The other classic hip-hop track about the riots is admittedly Dr. Dre’s *The Day the Niggaz Took Over*, which includes samples from Matthew McDaniels’ documentary “Birth of a Nation 4x29x92.”² Although we hold Dre and Snoop Dogg partly responsible for gangster rap’s debasement to black-on-black beef for the benefit of predominantly white consumers, this track indicates how politicized even apolitical rap still was in 1992, and how widely legitimized the riots were.

Years after Bob Marley recorded “Burnin and Lootin,” Los Angeles ska/punk band Sublime wrote their own anthem to insurrectionary uprisings. The lyrics escort the listener through a proletarian shopping spree featuring a variety of products that had remained beyond the songwriters’ reach until the riots undermined the usual power relations of capitalism. Vocalist Bradley Noel emphasizes that the riots were not simply a protest against an exceptional instance of police brutality, but a rejection of policing in general:

But if you look at the street, it wasn’t about Rodney King
It’s this fucked up situation, and these fucked up police
It’s about coming up and staying on top
And screaming, “187 on a motherfuckin’ cop”
It’s not in the paper, it’s on the wall

In the recorded version of the song, Noel gets the date of the riots wrong, singing “April 26” even though the title of the song is “April 29.” Perhaps he was not paying attention; perhaps, he was referring to the gang truce that set the stage for the uprising; or perhaps he was hinting

¹ In *Monster: Autobiography of an LA Gang Member*, recounting his experiences being bussed to a majority-white high school, Sanyika Shakur (aka Monster Kody Scott) describes an earlier instance of another cross-racial rebel alliance in the Los Angeles area: “I’d get with the others who had no interest in academia and we’d stand around and pose in all of our cool South Centralness. The punk movement was in full swing at that time, and the Valley punk rockers initially mistook us—the eight of us who were steeped in the subculture of banging—for punk rockers because of our dress code. Perhaps they thought we were their New Afrikan counterparts from the city. We dressed almost alike, but it was only coincidence—we had never seen or heard of punk rockers before coming out to the Valley. A couple of us thought they were Crips. We circled one another in an attempt to distinguish authenticity, then finally made a pact and began to hang out together.”

² Samples from this documentary also appear in various tracks by Dead Prez, among others.

that every day is a good day to rise up against police, that we don't have to wait for the next publicized instance of police or judicial injustice to set about destroying the system that makes them inevitable. It's charming to imagine the members of Sublime running riot all by themselves three days ahead of the day that the rest of Los Angeles joined in.

Finally, A Little Reading

For a thoughtful examination of how the democratization of video technology has contributed not only to outbreaks of unrest like the LA riots but also to desensitizing and pacifying the general populace, we recommend *From Passive to Active Spectacle: Afterimages of the LA Riots*. We'll conclude with its opening paragraph:

For us, the advent of the Rodney King video marks the first major shift in the political economy of spectacle, which we choose to describe as a passage from *passive* to *active* spectacle, from spectacle as pacifying object of passive consumption to spectacle as the active product of the consumer (whose leisures or recreations have long since become forms of work). In its classical form, spectacle creates a situation in which "spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other" (Debord). But at a certain point in its development, spectacle dispenses with the need for centralization, finding that passive consumers can quite easily be recruited to the *production* of spectacle. The shift from unilateral toward multilateral relations does not promise an end to isolation, but rather its perfection. We might think of the distinction here as the difference between the television screen and the computer screen, but since we are talking about a set of social relations as much as technological apparatuses, we should be careful to avoid identifying such relations with any particular technologies. The video camera is merely one of many devices which assist in the transformation of administered life into self-administered life.

This hints at the challenges today's hyper-represented generation will have to overcome in order to respond in kind to the assaults police continue to carry out against us, especially targeting black and brown people. We anticipate that the uprisings of the future will not be catalyzed by the integration of new voices into a "participatory" yet increasingly corporate-dictated media landscape, but rather will arise as a response to the poverty of solutions it can provide.

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