The Atlantic

What Incarcerated Rappers Can Teach America

This year's national reckoning over policing means that more people could stand to seriously listen to the music of young artists who have firsthand experience with the system.

By Hannah Giorgis

Deawnne Buckmire / Instagram / The Atlantic

SEPTEMBER 1, 2020

The week before Drakeo the Ruler released his latest album, the rapper's hometown of Los Angeles was swept up in protests, like many other cities around the country. Following the police killings of George

Floyd and Breonna Taylor, these demonstrations brought new public scrutiny to the U.S. criminal-justice system's racist practices. In Hollywood, where an estimated 100,000 people gathered that first weekend in June, one woman told the *Los Angeles Times* that she'd brought her grandsons because "with all the protests I've seen in the past, this is different. This is making a change." Abolishing prisons quickly became a topic of mainstream discussion.

For the 26-year-old Drakeo, seeing such intense interest in holding law enforcement accountable for alleged abuses is bittersweet. When we spoke on the phone later that month, he expressed ambivalence about the priorities of some racial-justice advocates. "People, just in general, they always wait until something bad happen. It's never like, *Oh, we should stop this before it goes too far*. It's, like, either *Somebody got killed* or *This person did 25 years in jail!*" he told me. As he speaks, he's interrupted by an automated voice that tells us, "This call is being recorded."

The same voice recurs throughout his newest album, *Thank You for Using GTL*, which Drakeo painstakingly recorded on phone calls with his producer, JoogSzn. Since last September, Drakeo has been detained at Men's Central Jail, the abuse-riddled downtown–Los Angeles facility that the American Civil Liberties Union has called a "modern-day medieval dungeon." (Last month, the county's board of supervisors voted to make a plan to close the jail within a year, citing the COVID-19 pandemic, among other factors.) Beginning with its title, *Thank You for Using GTL* underscores the soul-crushing bureaucracy and surveillance that inmates like Drakeo must navigate: GTL, or Global Tel Link, is one of several prison telecommunications companies that have been criticized for charging users exorbitant prices.

Drakeo isn't the first hip-hop artist to release music from jail. Nor is he the first to lament how often incarcerated people are forgotten by those on the outside and silenced by a labyrinthine system. But this year's national reckoning over policing means that more Americans could stand

to seriously listen to the music of Drakeo and other young rappers who have been incarcerated. Though their craft isn't limited to social analysis, they're making art about—and despite—their firsthand experiences with the institutions that ensnare millions of Americans.

In 2010, the lawyer Michelle Alexander published *The New Jim Crow*, her widely read (and banned) book arguing that the prison-industrial complex is another form of legalized discrimination. Five years later, the legal professor Donald F. Tibbs wrote an article connecting Alexander's analysis to rap music. "Since the 1990s, at the height of the drug war," Tibbs wrote, "hip-hop made the same argument about the fallout of the War on Drugs and its influence on mass incarceration, but no one seemed to be listening." Artists including N.W.A., Tupac Shakur, and LL Cool J have all addressed such injustices; their lyrics excoriate officers who commit unchecked abuses while revealing the psychological toll of being constantly watched.

When rappers write songs about police harassment, their records are often dismissed as a product of young Black men's vendettas against law enforcement. But Drakeo's case illustrates how rappers can have their song lyrics used against them as evidence. Though a jury acquitted Drakeo last July on all charges of murder and attempted murder stemming from a 2016 shooting death at a party, the L.A. district attorney later filed new charges of criminal gang conspiracy and shooting from a motor vehicle. During Drakeo's trial, prosecutors introduced footage from his music videos in an attempt to portray the artist as a violent threat. One detective reportedly told Drakeo that his words would be played in court because "jurors don't like to see that stuff."

These strategies rely on a jury's inability to identify rappers as artists capable of telling complex stories in their music. More than any other genre, hip-hop is often read as a purely literal art form. As the writer Briana Younger observed in *The New Yorker*, "We live in a time when music videos are treated as irrefutable evidence in court, but real-life cell-

phone footage of police killing an unarmed person is met with skepticism and suggestions that we should doubt our eyes. The hypocrisy relies on racist ideas, in both cases, about who deserves their rights and humanity."

Drakeo directly addresses the LAPD's preoccupation with his lyrics on the final track of *Thank You for Using GTL*. In the chorus of "Fictional," Drakeo defends the artistry of his rap: "It might sound real, but it's fictional / I love that my imagination gets to you." By the song's final moments, though, he's frustrated and contemplative, asking:

If you're gonna use my music against me, I expect you use it the same way you would …
This call is being recorded
Country music, punk rock, metal
Jazz, whatever
Blues, whatever
Treat rap the same way that you're gonna treat any other genre
You're not gonna hold Denzel Washington accountable for his role in *Training Day*
So don't do the same thing with my music

The relative ease with which law enforcement can label someone a potential gang member—especially young Black men from low-income neighborhoods—isn't a widely known feature of the criminal-justice system, though it is gaining visibility. In January, more than a dozen LAPD officers were investigated on suspicion of wrongly classifying people as gang members or associates; last month, three officers were charged with falsifying evidence, opening up hundreds of their past cases for review. These investigations have drawn attention to California's discriminatory gang laws, which criminalize actions as disparate and intangible as simply being at the scene of a crime, benefiting from someone's else crime through reputational gains, or, in the case of children, wearing certain colors to school.

Given his own experience with these laws, Drakeo remains frustrated with the public's unquestioning faith in the infallibility of police. "Some people think, like, if you go to jail and you got arrested for something,

then you did it—because [otherwise] why would they arrest you?" he told me. "They literally think like, *He had to be involved! They wouldn't just take him to jail for no reason!*"

Drakeo's story parallels that of another L.A. rapper, 03 Greedo, who is currently serving a 20-year sentence on drug-trafficking and weapons-possession charges in Abilene, Texas. Greedo, who co-released *Load It Up Vol. 01* with the producer Ron-RonTheProducer earlier this month, begins the mixtape with a recording that echoes the intro of *Thank You for Using GTL*. An automated voice announces a call from "an offender at Middleton Unit," then informs the listener that "this call is being recorded and is subject to monitoring." When Greedo begins to rap, he explains the meaning of his album title: Knowing he'd be incarcerated for decades, he recorded *thousands*of tracks before turning himself in back in June 2018.

When we spoke two weeks ago, Greedo said the prospect of serving a lengthy sentence created a sense of urgency to make music. "I just felt like it was my obligation—for me and for my family, which is really, like, my close homies and then my daughter," he said. "I just felt like I had to make somethin' shake for all of us, because the lifestyle we was livin', we didn't have nothin'."

Present in both Drakeo's and Greedo's music is the notion that much about their circumstances was predetermined. Born in South-Central Los Angeles and Watts, respectively, the men speak about their interactions with the law with a recognition that Black and low-income people disproportionately fill jails and prisons around the country. Unlike *Thank You for Using GTL*, which is composed entirely of songs made since Drakeo has been in jail, *Load It Up Vol. 01* is a work of palpable, preemptive anxiety.

"Where I'm from, you gotta get around without the police gettin' up on you," said the 33-year-old Greedo, who was raised in the same housing

projects where the 1993 hood drama *Menace II Society* was filmed. He refers to his mixtape's style as "creep music," in part because it feels like the soundtrack to the eerie, permanent state of fear engendered by constant interactions with the state. "It's just like watching a horror movie," he said of the haunting production, "and the bad guy might be walkin' up, and you start hearin' the strings or the piano, and you like, *Damn, somethin's finna happen.*"

Like many of Greedo's other records, *Load It Up Vol. 01* is a tonally varied project; some tracks detail familiar, illicit behaviors, while others explore his softer side. "I wanna show people why we still human. The things that we do might seem crazy, but we from somewhere where we not allowed to be emotional or else we look kinda weak," Greedo said. "But I think in my music I finally gave project people a voice to, you know, be in love or be heartbroken."

The responsibility to share the realities of life in Watts seems to weigh heavily on Greedo. He also knows that stereotypes about street rappers influence the way listeners perceive his craft. "Honestly, I could be a whole 'nother artist if I was from somewhere nicer," he said. "I don't think people understand that I wanna tell a story for my people and get the point across, but I wanna graduate from that. Because I'm much more lyrical than people know, and I'm a much better singer than people know."

The Philadelphia rapper BL Shirelle also knows that tension—between experimenting with music purely for the love of the art, and feeling pressure to explain the circumstances she was raised in. Like Greedo and Drakeo, BL has spent a lot of time thinking about the factors that contributed to her own incarceration at age 18. BL grew up surrounded by drug usage and crime; it was a shootout with an undercover police officer that first landed her in prison. When we spoke last month, BL told me that it took her a long time to understand the role her environment and police surveillance played in steering her toward prison.

"There was no secret. Like, they knew I was coming; my bed was prepared way before the act was even done," she said. "And I had to understand *that* to then be able to present [my story] while not taking all responsibility off of myself."

For BL, now 32, the desire to "further humanize" inmates motivates both her music and the work she does through Die Jim Crow Records, the first nonprofit label to partner exclusively with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists. On her latest album, *Assata Troi*, BL traces how she became "a victim of recidivism," referencing the social dynamics that criminalize young people like her while acknowledging her own mistakes over the years. Though she's no longer an inmate, she still has to deal with red tape to establish relationships with prisons and gain access to detained artists. The most challenging part of her job is this bureaucracy, which sometimes requires Die Jim Crow to make their artists' music "acceptable to other powers that really don't know shit," as BL described some corrections departments to me. "The censorship ... that's just horrific, for art," she said. "It goes against everything music stands for."

Considered alongside America's broader suppression of Black artistry, reminders that the rappers are being recorded, monitored, and watched are especially harrowing. But despite these intrusions, they're still making music that crystallizes their personal experiences and captures the dread that permeates so many parts of Black life. Speaking about the solitary confinement that he's been held in for months, a prison tactic that has been utilized around the country at escalating rates since the beginning of the pandemic, Drakeo connected his own ordeal with law enforcement to the threat that Black people navigate on the outside: "It's like they keep tryna silence me ... That's what all these protests are about, too."

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