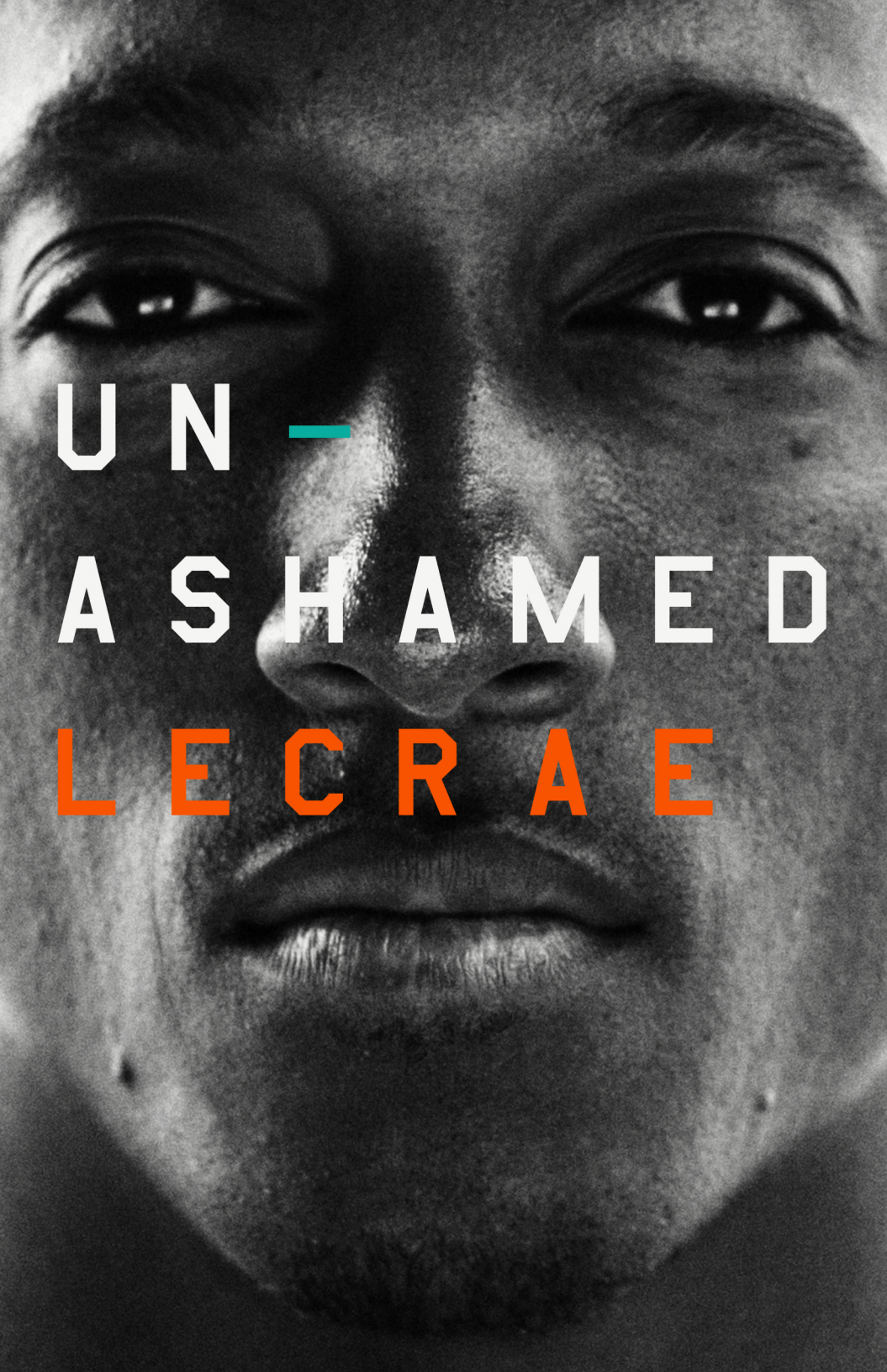
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LECRAE

WITH JONATHAN MERRITT

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For Big Momma,
I am the man I am today because
of the seeds you sowed in my life

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Lecrae | "Outsiders" | Anomaly

The paparazzi's cameras were flashing, but their lenses were all pointed at someone else.

I was at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, California, attending the 2015 Grammy Award ceremony. I'd been nominated for "Best Rap Performance," and was competing against the likes

of Eminem, Drake, and Kendrick Lamar. I had already won two Grammys, but this was different.

Many people don't know that all Grammy awards are not created equal. An unspoken hierarchy exists in many circles, and some categories are more respected than others. Within the music world, if you tell someone you won a Grammy, the first follow-up question is "Which category?" Though I'm grateful for my wins for "Best Gospel Album" and "Best Contemporary Christian Music Performance," as you might guess, some consider those closer to the bottom of the list than the top. But this nomination for "Best Rap Performance" had a different kind of significance. It told the world that an alternative voice with an alternative message was being considered among the biggest artists of our time. It said that the industry had finally recognized a new way of making hip-hop.

That's why I was so mad at myself when I arrived late to the red carpet after promising I'd get there early. It was a rookie mistake. The biggest stars show up just before show time, so all the younger and lesser known artists know to arrive early to avoid competing with Katy Perry for interviews. Even a few minutes can make a difference between landing a blurb in *Rolling Stone* and hearing crickets.

When I stepped out of the car, I thought to myself, *You are at the Grammys, man*. I tried to just be in the moment and not to look at the stands where fans were sitting and pointing and criticizing every fold and shade of fabric. There I was taking a coveted walk and rubbing shoulders with John Legend, Kanye West, Chris Brown, and Meghan Trainor. It was difficult to believe that after all of the writing and rapping and refining and recording and touring and promoting and praying, I stood there.

But as it turned out, walking the red carpet at the 2015 Grammys was a more complicated affair than I had imagined. People kept passing on interviews and some were painfully attempting to not even make eye contact with me.

Hey, that reporter looks like they are trying to get my attention, I thought. *Wait . . . no. . . . they are waving at Questlove.*

When I reached the end of the carpet—you know, the place where artists stand in front of the Grammys backdrop and a crowd of photographers takes their picture—a security guard lowered his hand and asked me to wait. He waved Iggy Azalea around me. She smiled, and the cameras went crazy. When she finished, I started to proceed and the security guard stopped me again. He waved Rick Ross through.

This happened so many times I lost count. Wiz Khalifa and then Taylor Swift and then Keith Urban and then Ziggy Marley. Somewhere in the process my wife threw up her hands and left me to go sit down. For 45 minutes I waited until the security guard finally raised his arm and waved me through.

I walked in front of the backdrop in my crisp tuxedo and shiny shoes, standing tall and proud as a nominee in a respected category. I gave them the best smile I had. And . . . almost every journalist lowered their camera. Maybe five of the forty photographers took my picture, and I'm pretty sure those were snapped out of pity.

Some people say the red carpet is the best litmus test for how famous you are or how famous you're not. For how accepted you are or aren't. If this is true, the message was clear: I am not one of "them."

I started to get that feeling earlier in the day at Jay-Z and Beyonce's "Roc Nation" party on a lawn tucked behind a Beverly Hills mansion. I'm kind of a people-watcher and also an introvert, so I made up my mind before arriving that I was going to sink back and mind my business.

The event was a whirlwind of hype and hustle. The smell of cigars and fancy French perfume filled the air while bartenders poured bottle after bottle of "Ace of Spades" champagne. Everyone was draped in borrowed jewelry and clothes made by designers that most people can't pronounce. Italian shoes, thousand-dollar jeans, tiny but noticeable logos on pockets and lapels. (Fashion is

something of an art for musicians, so everyone tries to strike a balance between the brand being obvious, but downplayed.)

It quickly became clear that there were two classes of people. In the center of yard was the first class: epic stars—Jay-Z and Kanye and Nicki Minaj and Rihanna. They were sitting on couches under a gazebo with security surrounding them.

And around the gazebo was the second class: everyone else. These were people from the famous, to the famous-ish, to the hope-to-be-famous. They were all talented and successful, but not part of the pantheon who exist in the stratosphere of super-celebrities. Many of them were hovering around the couches, pretending not to be mesmerized and hoping to get noticed.

After about twenty minutes of people watching, I snapped out of my daze and realized something: nobody had initiated a conversation with me. No one, that is, except for record executives who thought I could make them some money. I stood on the outside, barely part of the second group. While everyone else was congregating and hi-fiving, I was just taking up space.

People who've only seen me perform might assume that I'm confident and that being ignored wouldn't bother me—but it does. There was actually a fight inside of me. Sure, I was turned off by the way it all felt a little like high school, with everyone trying to be one of the cool kids or at least friends with the cool kids. The only difference is that this is all happening with adults who know better. Everyone goes to the bathroom and gets nervous and has family drama. Everyone is no more or less human than anyone else. So the whole thing felt a little trivial and silly.

And yet, another part of me wanted to be there. To be a part of the in-crowd. To be liked and respected and noticed. Who doesn't want to be accepted? But I'm not—at least not in the same way.

You might assume I was an outsider because I'm the "new kid" and people just didn't know who I was. But as record executives started introducing me to others, I discovered this was not true.

"I want you to meet Lecrae," the record executive would often say. "He's a *Christian* rapper."

"I know who you are," they would respond with a patronizing smile. "I'm familiar with your music."

The awkwardness would grow, and I could almost hear their thoughts: *Can I cuss around him? He is about to preach at me, or judge me if I drink this whole bottle of Cristal and stumble out of here?* Maybe they don't know if they can be fully themselves around me. Or perhaps they don't think they would like the content of my music or the assumptions behind my music or the worldview I hold. Regardless, they don't want to know more. From that point on, it felt awkward. It was like I was marked.

This isn't the first time I've felt shunned me because of people's preconceptions. A few years ago, for example, I was invited to attend a Sacramento Kings basketball team practice. I brought a bunch of my newly released "Church Clothes" mixtapes to give away to any who was interested. When I was introduced, the person said, "Hey, y'all. We've got a Gospel Rapper here who has some music if you want it."

No one picked up an album.

After getting into a conversation with one of the players, I asked him if he wanted some music. "Nah, man," he said, "I don't do Gospel rap. I don't want all those Bible verses and preaching." I tried to tell him my album wasn't like that—it addressed issues like fatherlessness and insecurity, things that nonreligious people can relate to—but it didn't matter. He wouldn't touch it because of the way I was introduced.

Being an outspoken Christian in the music industry means always feeling out of place. It's like whatever you have accomplished is less credible because of your faith. You're in the circle, but you're not *really* in the circle. You fit in, but you don't *really* fit in. When you're standing next to people or sitting beside people, it's as if you're not really there.

This is one of the reasons I don't fully embrace the "Christian rapper" label. It isn't that I'm ashamed of being a Christian. I'm not. If someone asked me to renounce my faith or take a bullet in the brain, I'm dying that day. But labeling the music that way creates hurdles and is loaded down with baggage. Plus, it just isn't a true expression of the music I'm making. I try to produce music that is life-giving and inspires people to hope, but it isn't just for the super-religious. I want to address themes that people who aren't Christian can appreciate.

There was a time when I was making music that appealed only to those inside the church. But that day of exclusivity is long gone. My albums will always have my DNA in them, and I will always be a Christian, but I'm trying to do something different now. But for many who aren't familiar with me, this doesn't matter. I'm already marked as an Christian rapper, and maybe I always will be. As a result, whether I'm walking the red carpet or at a party or talking to professional athletes or even having a conversation at the barber shop, I'll always feel tension. I'll always be an outsider.

In nearly every interview I do with the media, people struggle to talk about my actual music. Instead, they want to know if I smoke or drink or cuss. They ask if I feel weird around non-Christians. They want to know if I'm trying to evangelize people. I'm like a caged animal that people want to observe, but aren't sure how close they can get.

Once I was visiting a mainstream radio station in North Carolina while on tour, and a station operator informed me that they wouldn't air my music: "We really love your sound, but we just don't play Gospel here."

"It's not, Gospel; It's hip-hop," I protested. "It's just that *I* am a Christian."

The guy couldn't wrap his head around it. He said they had a sister station that played Gospel but they weren't interested in my music either because "church moms don't want to hear rap."

You don't have to be a rapper who is Christian to understand what I'm talking about. If you're a person of faith who works a regular job, or interacts with your neighbors, you have likely felt this tension. You've probably sensed it at parties, or office functions or over coffee with nonreligious friends. If you're a Christian and you have a pulse—you probably know what I'm describing.

It's like, you fit in, but you don't fully fit in. There is a sameness with those around you, but also a difference. You feel accepted by those around you, but not all the time or all the way. You may have gotten used to it, but it still raises important questions about what it means to be Christian in a world that assumes Christians are obnoxious. Or irrelevant. Or hypocritical. Or judgmental. Or ignorant. Or bigoted. Or any number of negative adjectives.

Looking back, it seems like God has been preparing me to navigate this space all of my life. Ever since I was a knucklehead kid stirring up trouble, I have always stuck out. I've been *like* people but not exactly like them. I've always been from a different place, a different perspective.

I was an artistic kid growing up in an urban culture that didn't know what to do with artists.

I was influenced by the gangstas in my family but didn't have the skill set or desire to follow suit.

I ended up with a theater scholarship to college, but didn't fit in with the fine arts crew.

As my single mom and I moved from city to city, I never seemed to find my niche. Every significant life event, every birthday was a reminder that *I didn't fit in*.

It's as if God had enrolled me in boot camp, and I wasn't even aware of it. It's like God knew that one day I'd need a little extra something to keep showing up when it felt awkward, to keep walking when no one noticed, to keep making music even though many dismiss it before even listening to it.

I didn't win the Grammy for "Best Rap Performance" that year, and I was surprisingly disappointed when my name wasn't

called. But in retrospect, I think I received something that was more valuable: a reminder that part of being human—and especially being Christian—means not fitting in and the only solution is learning to look to God for ultimate recognition.

As I've said in songs and speeches, if you live for people's acceptance, you'll die from their rejection. This belief has made it possible to keep doing what I do and keep being who I am, unashamed.

> *My name is Lecrae.*
> *I'm not who people assume I am.*
> *I don't fit neatly into people's boxes or conform to people's labels.*
> *I have a troubled past and have made more than my share of mistakes.*
> *A few years ago, I met God and started making music.*
> *Neither of these has made life simple.*
> *I still make my share of mistakes.*
> *I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'm like you.*
> *I'm a lifelong wanderer trying to love God and be who I was created to be.*
> *This is my story.*
> *And maybe it's yours too.*

01-
DADDY ISSUES

Dear Uncle Chris, Uncle Keith, Uncle Ricky,
Before the Lord get me I gotta say something quickly
I grew up empty since my daddy wasn't with me, shoot,
I wasn't picky I'd take any male figure
You stepped in at the right time . . .
I just wanna be like you,
Walk like, talk like, even think like you
The only one I could look to,
You're teaching me to be just like you

Lecrae | "Just Like You" | Rehab

"Somebody get the doctor in here."

A nurse shouts down a hallway at Houston's Harris County Hospital. She rushes back into the room and tries to calm a screaming woman who is drenched with sweat and gripping the bedside in pain. It's just past 1:30 p.m. in the afternoon on October 9. The physician finally arrives, and a handful of heaves and grunts

later, a 7-pound-1-ounce baby with a stack of black hair running down the center of his head takes a first breath.

Cradling the child in her arms, the woman looked into the eyes of her new son, Lecrae Devaughn Moore.

And so my story began.

My mom, who goes by the nickname "Tut," had unexpectedly gotten pregnant when she was only twenty-three. She had already broken up with my dad. The two knew they were young and immature, but they decided to get married anyway. That's just what people did in those days under such circumstances.

But my parents' biggest problems didn't stem from their ages; they resulted from my father's abusive personality. He was using drugs and drinking heavily. His unpredictable temper combined with her fiery disposition made for an explosive situation—not one conducive for raising an infant. My mom knew he was one bad trip away from getting really ugly. Before I even reached my first birthday, my mom snatched me up and escaped. I became a fatherless child before I could even pronounce the word *daddy*.

Raising me by herself meant struggling to make ends meet. Between the occasional government assistance and my mom's multiple jobs, we never lacked basic necessities. We always had food on the table. It may have been liver, cheap meat, and government cheese, but the table was never bare. Even if our clothes came from Goodwill, we were never without shoes or shirts. As a result, I didn't realize I lacked the financial means other children had. I knew we didn't have as much as some kids in my school, but I assumed we were like a lot of other normal people.

By elementary school I had left Houston and moved to Denver's Park Hill neighborhood, but things barely improved. Poorer communities in Colorado aren't as bad as hoods in other parts of the country, but they aren't vacation destinations either. Crime was common, and drugs were everywhere. We may or may not have had weed growing in our backyard and my baby sitter

may or may not have cooked crack in her kitchen. (Before the "war on drugs," these sorts of things were more common.)

Whatever I lacked in terms of financial resources, I made up for with machismo. In first grade, when most children learn basic addition and subtraction, I knocked a kid's tooth right out of his mouth. In fourth grade, when kids are experimenting with the scientific method, I was formally (but incorrectly) accused by my school administration of gang activity.

Part of my bravado was a way to hide the nagging feelings of insignificance as a young kid. My mother and my aunts tried their best to encourage me and tell me they believed in me, but the unspoken forces in the world made me feel like "less than." Even though I wrestled with self-esteem and a lack of identity, I couldn't articulate it. And when I did, others didn't seem to care. So I began to believe that my problems and pain weren't important, that I should keep these thoughts bottled up, which only worked until the anger built up and spilled over on those around me.

"Why are you always acting out, Lecrae?" my mom often asked me after I had gotten into trouble.

I shrugged my shoulders like I didn't know.

But deep down, I *did* know the source of it all.

★ ★ ★

Underneath all of my pain and misbehavior was a sense of emptiness. After my mom and I escaped my dad's instability, he decided to stay away. And the hole left by my father's absence throbbed constantly like an open wound that refused to scab over. On a lazy Saturday, my mind would sometimes flood with questions:

> *Where is my dad right now?*
> *Is he thinking of me too?*
> *If so, why doesn't he find me?*
> *Why doesn't he at least call me?*

Countless questions. Zero answers.

Sitting in class with my elbow propped up on the desk, and my head leaning against the palm of my hand, I'd stare out of the window and begin to daydream about what it would be like to have a dad around. My imagination filled the hole my father left with romanticized versions of what I thought he would be like.

Lying in bed at night before falling asleep, I'd picture my dad showing up and making our family complete. I could almost hear the knock at the door and could almost see the door swing open. My heart rate increased as I imagined him walking into our home and fixing our problems. He was an absentee struggling with addiction, but in my young mind, he was a superhero. He had the power to swoop in and save the day, to save me from my confusion and frustration and woes—*if he wanted to.*

I mostly held it together during waking hours. After playing in the neighborhood, when a man's voice would call a friend of mine home for dinner, I wished it were *my* dad calling *my* name—but I wouldn't let others know. On occasion when no one was around, I would shatter like a window pane and break down. Tears, tears, and more tears. Telling my mom I wanted to go live with my dad. Asking her where he went and why he didn't want to be with us. She would try to offer answers that painted a dignified picture of him, but it never satisfied.

The years rolled on, but the pain never disappeared. I mourned my dad's absence and yearned for his presence. Every child wants and needs a father, and mine didn't want anything to do with me. No phone calls. No birthday cards. No arm around the shoulder after a bad day at school. (Actually, one call and one card.)

I'm not the only kid to grow up with this pain. Millions of fatherless children in America struggle with this reality. The loneliness. The missing person in the stands when they finally hit the home run. The pain of watching their mothers struggle to bear the burden of a two-person job. The sinking feelings one gets when the sun rises and sets on yet another Father's Day. And, of course,

the hundreds of aching, unanswered questions that leave them wanting to scream, "How come he don't want me?" like Will in that famous scene from "Fresh Prince of BelAir" after his deadbeat dad leaves again.

I've heard people say that the traumas from our childhood follow us into adulthood. That's certainly true for me. If you could trace my life's biggest struggles back to their origin, most of them would lead to a childhood version of me wrestling with my father's absence. Even when I wasn't rebelling or having an emotional breakdown, there was a dull, throbbing sense of rejection and abandonment.

Because I felt like my dad valued drugs more than having me as a son, I've constantly wrestled with my self-worth and craved the approval of others. Because I thought the person who should have found me easy to love didn't, I wondered if I was worthy of love. Because he didn't consider me reason enough to stay, I always felt like a disappointment to others. Because my dad's nonexistence stirred up so much anger, my temper flared and hurt those around me. And because I lacked a consistent male role model in my life, I had no idea what it meant to be a man.

In the swirling pain of abandonment and insignificance, I searched for someone—anyone—I could look up to. My cousins and uncles filled this role somewhat as the only older males in my life. They were my surrogate role models, but no one filled in the cracks completely. They were more like pieces of a composite dad. Each had their strengths.

My Uncle Keith, for example, was introverted like me and passionate about music. He introduced me to Reggae, and was always introducing me to new artists. We would listen to Yellowman and Marley and all kinds of records together for hours on end. My Uncle Ricky was stylish and creative, and taught me how to be well groomed. He was always encouraging and affirming, and he actually enjoyed spending time with me. We looked alike and sometimes when people would mistake me for being his son,

he'd claim me. My Uncle Chris was as tough as steel, and I drew strength from him. Hanging with him was exhilarating, and I always felt like he had a plan for me.

But unlike the father I wanted, I didn't see my uncles and cousins everyday. Some lived close by, but most were half a continent away. I wanted role models who really understood me and never left my side. I wanted role models who spoke my language and were willing to tell me the truth about life.

And this is where hip-hop rushed in like water to fill the cracks left by my father's absence.

★ ★ ★

My first encounters with hip-hop took the form of covert missions. At least, that's how they seemed as a five-year-old. I spent the summers at my grandmother's house with my middle school-aged cousins. After I was put to bed, my cousins would turn on "Yo! MTV Raps," an early hip-hop music show. Laying in bed, the music would filter under the door like an alarm clock and I'd spring out of bed. Staying low to the ground, I'd sneak into the living room and peek at the television from behind the couch.

For two hours, the "Yo! MTV Raps" hosts, Ed Lover and Fab 5 Freddy, would introduce videos by the likes of Ice Cube and Tribe Called Quest. The images would reflect off my eyes, and I would sit mesmerized. One of the first music videos I saw was by Eazy E and featured a kid who looked like I did. The language, scenes and sounds felt familiar, but embellished. It made my world seem glamorous and attractive rather than unfortunate. It was instantly relatable.

On Saturday mornings, I'd wake up before anyone else and go to the living room to watch cartoons. But one morning, I discovered a channel that played rap videos early on Saturdays. From then on, there was an internal battle about what I should watch. Some mornings Bugs Bunny would win. Others, Nas came out

victorious. But over time, it wasn't a contest. I went straight to the hip-hop.

When I returned home to my mom's house, I wasn't able to watch MTV because we didn't have cable, so I sought it out other places. I'd borrow tapes from friends and even watch the free previews for the pay-per-view music channel over and over.

My mother worked at a halfway house, and when she had to work late, sometimes she would take me with her. Whenever the former inmates would rap at the table, I observed and took mental notes about their style and song choices.

"Here you go, little man," an old resident whispered to me one day.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a mixtape cassette, and slid it across the table to me.

It might as well have been a $100 bill. I played that tape on repeat—day after day after day. Memorizing every lyric from every song by every artist he included—NWA, Beastie Boys, LL Cool J. It was all I wanted to listen to. The music consumed me.

As I aged, hip-hop became a regular part of my life and not just something I encountered once in a while when no one was looking. My mom always played music in the house. As I grew older, she joined in and played more commercial rap like MC Hammer.

My friends and I began hunting down rap videos and emulating what we saw on television. We'd sing the songs and try to replicate the outfits. In the afternoons, my cousins would put down cardboard in the front yard and break dance in their old school Adidas jogging suits. They would pop and dance and have rap battles with other kids in the neighborhood. By the time I was eleven or so, all my free time consisted of listening to music and watching videos. Like most of my friends at the time, I had no other aspiration other than being a rapper. No doubt. It was going to happen one day.

My obsession with hip-hop stemmed from more than my love of music. It also filled the vacuous cavern left by my father.

When I was younger, not having my dad was like losing a security blanket. Without him, I didn't feel fully safe or fully loved or fully wanted. But it became painful in a different way as I aged. I didn't have anyone to teach me to shave or talk to me about women or answer my questions about what it meant to grow and mature and act responsibly. There was no one there to say, "I know what you're going through; I've been there." Young boys need their fathers to model and teach them what being a man means (just like girls need mothers to help them grow into women). Without any constant male role models, hip-hop artists became my heroes.

This is actually a common social phenomenon in poor communities where fatherlessness is rampant. As one African-American writer who grew up with an absentee dad wrote, "In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, the answer [to fatherlessness] for many of us was hip-hop. Nowhere was there a more ready supply of black men with something to say and the ability to articulate it in a way that allowed others to relate and learn than in the booming hip-hop culture. For young black men in search of guidance from someone with a face that looked like their own, rappers became the surrogate fathers."[1]

Tupac became my second parent. He was sort of like my mom and my favorite uncle wrapped into one person. My mom was passionate about cultural empowerment, and my uncle was a gangsta. When loneliness grew heavy, when I needed advice or direction, when happiness morphed into sadness, I'd listen to Tupac. Unlike my father, he was always there for me. I could trust him.

On days when I felt the sting of abandonment, for example, I'd play his "2Pacalypse Now" album. A track called "Papa'z Song" might as well have been written with me in mind.

I rarely spoke about my traumas, but Tupac seemed to speak about them for me. He gave voice to *my* angst and frustration, *my* life and situation. Tupac was so special to me that when he was killed, I wept while watching his funeral procession on television. It was almost like my actual father had died.

For those who grew up in a rural town with both parents or in a comfortable suburban community where your biggest concern is what time Applebee's closes, my relationship to hip-hop might sound a little far fetched or silly. But it makes perfect sense for those who were raised in the inner-city during that time.

When I was a child, most people feared urban communities and the people who lived there. "White flight" was taking place in cities across the country, and this meant that many cultural influencers—filmmakers, authors, journalists, preachers, teachers, politicians—didn't understand those of us without the means or desire to leave. Whenever politicians and TV preachers talked about inner-city neighborhoods, they often promoted stereotypes. Television and film rarely projected images of black youth in these communities unless they were criminals or fit certain stereotypes. The implicit message from culture to kids like me was that the world wasn't made for me or at least didn't understand me.

This disconnect to the broader culture was further intensified by an inner-city culture that encourages hardness and machismo. A kid in the hood couldn't just sit around whining about wanting a daddy or family unity without being laughed at or told to toughen up. Yet somehow rappers like Tupac and Ice Cube got away with it. And this brought kids like me relief.

Hip-hop gave me hope that even though I felt alone, I wasn't. It reminded me that there was often a difference in the value people ascribe to you and your actual worth. It told me that my pain was valid. That even though I wasn't speaking of my struggles, they were worth discussing. And at a time when I didn't feel heard or seen, hip-hop made me feel significant.

★ ★ ★

As time progressed, the music sank deeper and deeper into my soul. But things got real when the music started to flow back out of me.

Throughout grade school, I didn't feel like I had much to offer society. In the hood, the way you form your identity is to find something you're good at and then form a mini-community with other people who are good at the same thing. But unlike other kids, I wasn't the star of anything. I wasn't good at fighting—my scrawny frame wasn't going to be scaring anyone off my turf on the playground. I wasn't an athlete—I wasn't interested, and anyway, there was no one to take me to practice. I wasn't the most intelligent—I wasn't flunking classes but I wasn't headed for Harvard either. I wasn't stylish and fashionable—we didn't have enough money to hang with the best-dressed kids.

So there were kids who played basketball and kids who jumped rope and kids who solved math problems. I was only good at hanging out. At after school programs, I'd run around on the playground and goof off with the other hanger-outers, but I lacked any cultural currency or credibility. I felt like I had nothing . . . but then I enrolled in a talent show.

The Boys and Girls Club ran an after school program that I attended during grade school and they decided that the kids needed something to show off their gifts. I remember there were a lot of dance groups. I wasn't a part of one of those, but I knew I could rap. So I signed up.

I liked performing, so I was excited to have an opportunity to prove I was good at something. I decided to do Naughty By Nature's "O.P.P.". Every morning for the week leading up to the talent show, I would sing into my comb standing in front of the mirror. I practiced my moves and my facial expressions. By the time the day I arrived, I owned it.

My name was called, and I was introduced.

> *Deep inhale. Slow exhale.*

And then I let the music out. The cadence, the tone, the pitch was perfect. I was dancing and singing and rapping. Halfway

through the first verse, I looked out at the crowd. People in the front were bouncing from foot to foot. Slowly it spread, and then people were feeling me. Their cheers grew.

The praise fueled me to perform harder, to dance faster, to rap better. I had listened to the song so many times, I could probably have sung it in my sleep. It was all muscle memory now. My pulse quickened. Adrenaline rushed. My face beamed, but I was locked in. Euphoria.

Suddenly, kids were slapping their hands over their mouths and shaking their heads in disbelief. I heard one yell, "Oh, shoot. Is that Lecrae? I didn't know he could rap." And when it was all over, they erupted in applause.

Like I said, where I grew up, one's currency comes from what they're good at. From then on, kids would ask me to rap on the playground. The brave ones would challenge me to battles, but no one could beat me. I practiced at night to make sure I'd be on fire when the time came.

My social status rose at the Boys and Girls Club, but the deeper longings remained. Childhood inched toward adolescence, but in some ways I remained that baby boy born in Harris County Hospital a handful of years prior. I was still crying out for attention, nourishment, and love. I didn't have athleticism or toughness or fancy clothes or the highest intelligence. I didn't have a father at home or any consistent role models to show me what growing up looked like.

But at least I had the music.

Music was my everything. It was my escape. It was my medicine. It was my therapy. It was my identity. It was my companion. It was my sanity. In the face of so many problems, music was my salvation.

Well, almost.

Some of life's struggles are so severe that even music is powerless to overcome them.