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Queens Reigns Supreme

*Fat Cat, 50 Cent, and the Rise of
the Hip Hop Hustler*

Ethan Brown

QUEENS REIGNS SUPREME

Fat Cat, 50 Cent, and the
Rise of the Hip-Hop Hustler

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New York

This book is dedicated to
the Snake Charmer,
southeast Queens'
preeminent street historian

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THE PLAYERS

Randy Allen: Former executive with RUN-DMC DJ Jam Master Jay's record label JMJ Records and member of hip-hop duo Rusty Waters.

Darryl "Homicide" or "Hommo" Baum: Stick-up kid murdered in June 2000 allegedly by the notoriously violent Brooklyn drug gang called Cash Money Brothers.

Charles Fisher: Former president of Rushland, a fan club that represented Rush Management artists RUN-DMC and LL Cool J. In the wake of Jam Master Jay's killing in the fall of 2000, Fisher started a tipline to solicit anonymous tips about the crime.

Donald Francois: Former employee of JMJ Records and Rush Management.

Jeff Fludd: High-profile Hollis resident who started a crew called Two-Fifth Down with Jam Master Jay and also road managed RUN-DMC.

Irving Lorenzo aka Irv Gotti: Music business entrepreneur born and bred in Hollis who rose from the ranks at record labels such as TVT and Def Jam to become the CEO of his own Def Jam-distributed imprint, Murder Inc. (Currently known as "The Inc.")

Christopher Lorenzo aka Chris Gotti: Irving Lorenzo's brother and vice president of The Inc.

Damion "World" Hardy: Ex-boyfriend of rapper Lil' Kim and allegedly the leader of the Brooklyn gang called Cash Money Brothers.

Douglas "Butta Love" Hayes: Highly respected Hollis resident who befriended RUN-DMC Darryl "DMC" McDaniels and shielded him from neighborhood hustlers.

Curtis Jackson aka 50 Cent: Small-time crack dealer turned superstar rapper. Sabrina, 50's mother, was a crack dealer and crack addict who worked in the shadows of a drug organization run by Lorenzo "Fat Cat" Nichols on 150th Street and Sutphin Boulevard in the South Jamaica section of southeast Queens.

Rodney Jones aka Boe Skagz: Nephew of Jam Master Jay and member of the hip-hop duo Rusty Waters.

Karl "Big D" Jordan: Road manager for RUN-DMC and former vice president at Run Management. Jordan was also a onetime suspect in the murder of Jam Master Jay.

Karl "Little D" Jordan Jr: Son of "Big D" who was arrested in the May 2003 shooting of Jam Master Jay's nephew Boe Skagz.

Harold "Lovey" Lawson: Childhood friend of Jam Master Jay's who lived on Jay's 203rd Street block.

Randolph and Lamont Lucas: A pair of brothers from southeast Queens who killed a parole officer named Brian Rooney in 1985 at the behest of Lorenzo "Fat Cat" Nichols. Randolph also served as an informant in the federal criminal conspiracy case against Jimmie "Henchmen" Rosemond.

Howard "Pappy" Mason: Lieutenant in the drug organization run by Lorenzo "Fat Cat" Nichols who ordered the slaying of rookie cop Edward Byrne. Mason also ran his own drug gang called The Bebos.

Darryl "DMC" McDaniels: Hollis-born RUN-DMC MC and lyricist.

Kenneth "Supreme" McGriff aka 'Preme: The CEO of the crack-dealing crew called the Supreme Team. After his release from prison in 1995, he became a hip-hop entrepreneur who went into business with The Inc.'s Irving Lorenzo on a straight-to-DVD movie called *Criminal Partners*.

Thomas "Tony Montana" Mickens: A *Scarface*-obsessed cocaine kingpin from the Springfield/Laurelton section of southeast Queens who amassed an empire of yachts, condos and luxury cars.

Gerald "Prince" Miller: Nephew of Kenneth "Supreme" McGriff who ran the Supreme Team.

while McGriff was imprisoned.

Jason Mizell aka Jam Master Jay: RUN-DMC DJ from Hollis who was slain in his southeast Queens recording studio on October 30, 2002.

Freddie “Nickels” Moore: Hollis-bred former hustler and onetime manager of Tupac Shakur.

Lorenzo “Fat Cat” Nichols: The most feared and powerful hustler in southeast Queens. The Nichols organization not only netted millions from the sale of crack, cocaine, and heroin but also supplied competing crews such as the Supreme Team with drugs.

Ernesto “Puerto Rican Righteous” Piniella: Supreme Team strongman bred in South Jamaica.

Joseph “Bobo” or “Mike Bone” Rogers: High-ranking lieutenant in the Lorenzo “Fat Cat” Nichols organization.

Jimmy “Henchmen” Rosemond: Brooklyn-bred former hustler turned hip-hop producer and manager who has worked with everyone from Groove Theory to The Game.

Curtis Scoon: Former hustler from Hollis turned screenwriter and onetime suspect in the murder of Jam Master Jay.

Joseph “Run” Simmons: Hollis-born RUN-DMC rapper and lyricist.

Russell Simmons: Brother of Joseph “Run” Simmons and cofounder of the Def Jam record label and Rush Management.

Darnell “Nellie D” Smith: Onetime RUN-DMC DJ and crew member.

Eric “E Money Bags” Smith: Aspiring rapper and sometime hustler from the Lefrak City section of Queens who was murdered near a friend’s home in southeast Queens in 1991. Kenneth “Supreme” McGriff allegedly ordered the killing of Smith in retaliation for the murder of Supreme Team associate Colbert “Black Just” Johnson.

Eric “Shake” Smith: Milwaukee, Wisconsin-based real estate broker and longtime friend of

Jam Master Jay.

Randy “Stretch” Walker: Hollis-bred rapper and manager who befriended Tupac Shakur in the early 1990s and was killed near his home in southeast Queens during the fall of 1995.

Ronald “Tinard” Washington: Southeast Queens stick-up kid and onetime suspect in the killings of both Walker and Jam Master Jay.

Richard “White Boy Rick” Wershe Jr.: Caucasian cocaine kingpin (hence the “white boy” nickname) from Detroit who allegedly ran a multimillion-dollar auto theft ring with Lorenzo “Fat Cat” Nichols from a Florida prison. Longtime friend of rap-rock superstar Kid Rock.

Chaz “Slim” Williams: Hip-hop entrepreneur born in Harlem but raised in South Jamaica section of southeast Queens who mentored 50 Cent and worked with Kenneth “Supreme” McGriff on the *Black Gangster* soundtrack released in 1999.

Derek “Talib” Yancey: Friend and longtime associate of Curtis Scoon questioned by the feds during their investigation into Irving Lorenzo aka Irv Gotti and Kenneth “Supreme” McGriff.

A Sit-Down with Gotti

Irv “Gotti” Lorenzo is ranting about the government with a ferocity and paranoia that are equal parts Oliver Stone and tinfoil-hat amateur conspiracy theorist. The plump, chipmunk-cheeked CEO of The Inc., the record label that counts Ashanti and Ja Rule among its R&B and hip-hop stars and has sold more than 14 million records, is sitting on an oversize brown leather desk chair in the company’s cluttered offices at 440 9th Avenue near 34th Street on Manhattan’s West Side. He is in the middle of a long, discursive tirade about the nearly four-year federal investigation into his music business empire.

The allegations against The Inc. (formerly Murder Inc.) include money laundering and drug trafficking, but when we met for a sit-down in late December 2004, an indictment had yet to be filed. It’s only a matter of time; the prosecutor, Roslynn R. Mauskopf, is a tenacious U.S. attorney who has brought indictments in high-profile cases against defendants such as the pilot who crashed the Staten Island ferry and killed eleven passengers as well as Bonanno family capos. Despite his persistent protestations of innocence, Lorenzo seems to understand this.

“Let me ask you a question,” Irv says, looking up from a desk covered with two-way pagers and cell phones. “This is the government, right? This isn’t the NYPD. They killed JFK, the government killed JFK, that’s pretty much common knowledge, right? I’m not saying anything crazy by saying that, right?” Before I can correct him, Irv continues: “I’m saying that to give you a parallel that the government can pretty much do anything they want to do. It’s pretty safe to say that, right? They can start a war with Iraq or Iran, talk about weapons of mass destruction, take all of their oil, give fuckin’ Colin Powell billions of dollars to do reconstruction. Everything I’m saying right now isn’t a lie, right? This is factual shit, right?”

Irv pauses to answer a cell phone that rings, incongruously, with the tune of Soft Cell’s eighties pop hit “Tainted Love.” “I’m doing an interview,” Irv barks into the phone and then slams it down. “They”—the government again—“can do whatever they want. They can rig elections. When fucking Gore beat them by the votes they say, ‘No, fuck you! *Electorally* Bush won.’ In the last election, it was Florida, but this time it’s Ohio. We’re thinking Orlando is the place but they’re like”—Irv pantomimes a Republican operative conspiratorially picking up a phone—“ ‘Go to Cleveland!’ ” Irv lets out a loud, hiccupy cackle.

Even in the boastful world of hip-hop, Irv Lorenzo is known for having a monumental ego. After remixing a track for Jennifer Lopez (in which he convinced the Latina movie star and singer to use the word *nigga*, thus causing a huge controversy in the African-American community), Irv taunted Puff Daddy by telling him, “Puff, come listen to the new record I did with your old bitch.” Irv’s Mafia-inspired nickname—given to him by Jay-Z when the two were touring together in the early nineties—comes not from a reputation for street toughne

but from his brassy, ballsy, bossy personality. Today, Irv is even more animated than usual. It's easy to understand why: Just a few weeks before our meeting, The Inc.'s bookkeeper Cynthia Brent and Ja Rule's manager Ron "Gutta" Robinson were indicted on money laundering charges, the clearest sign yet that law enforcement's noose is tightening around Irv and his brother.

The producer and The Inc. impresario hasn't given any interviews about his legal troubles, save a short, guarded Q&A with *The Los Angeles Times* in June of 2003, so to him our conversation may seem a rare opportunity to vent his frustrations with the seeming unending federal investigation into his hip-hop empire. "I'm trying to paint a picture for you that the government can do whatever they want," Irv continues in a more reserved tone, becoming aware of how unglued his rant is starting to sound. "They've been investigating me for four years. They raided my office after two years. This will be going on—what—year number three, this will be the three-year anniversary of them raiding my offices, right? They've been on me four years and they just arrested ... the bookkeeper!" He lets out a huge guffaw. "And Ja's manager. Do you think they wanted to arrest the bookkeeper and Ja's manager or do you think they wanted to arrest me?"

I want to tell Irv that federal investigations work very slowly and that the indictments of Brent and Robinson could mean that they will testify against him in exchange for reduced sentences. But before I can respond, Irv starts ranting again. "Skip all of the Cynthia Brent shit," he proclaims, waving his hands dramatically in the air, "the blockbuster shit is me, I'm Gotti walking outta here in handcuffs." This will be the first of many times in our conversation that Irv refers to himself in the third person. "So what I meant to say, after I painted this glorious picture of how the government has all these resources, they have all these things at their fingertips, and they've been looking at me for four years and I'm still sitting here talking to you, I think that's so crystal clear that I didn't do anything. I think anybody with a small brain would say, 'They didn't lock this guy up yet—maybe this fuckin' guy didn't do anything?' Because you know what? They have snitches on file that everybody knows about, they have all of this shit and how come they can't find something to put together? This isn't a knock on them. I'm not saying this to antagonize them. I'm just saying this to say: 'Maybe I didn't do anything.' "

Irv leans in toward me, pushing aside everything scattered on his desk. "In a twisted way I'm happy because now it will come to a fuckin' close," he says. "During this whole time I wanted the government to investigate. Because if this is what they're saying about me, please investigate. Get all of your snitches, get all of your informants, gather all of the information you can. Because I know sitting here once you got all of your information you gonna be like 'Fuck, he didn't do nothing.' " It's the most conciliatory moment of the interview, but it doesn't last long once our talk turns to the focus of the investigation into The Inc.: Irv's tie to one of the most iconic drug kingpins from southeast Queens, Kenneth "Supreme" McGriff. Two of the allegations against Irv, made by a special agent in the IRS's criminal investigation division, are that 'Preme provided start-up money for The Inc. in the nineties and that the drug kingpin served as muscle for the label, intimidating rival rappers and music business executives. The charges infuriate Irv, though not because he believes them to be wholly without cause. "It's not preposterous," Irv admits. "I can see what they're thinking." Instead, he seems to be upset that the feds believe a street hustler from the eighties, not Lorenz

himself, is responsible for The Inc.'s string of multiplatinum successes in the nineties and beyond. "Back in the eighties, 'Preme was the legend," Irv proclaims, thumping his desk with his fist loudly for effect, "but guess what? I'm the fucking legend now."

Irv's bravado is often reminiscent of both *Scarface* and *Sunset Boulevard* but there is a great deal of truth to it. During the eighties the crack epidemic brought mountains of cash to drug dealers big and small, thus making hustlers iconic. Though a few eighties-era MCs possessed street pedigree—rapper Rakim famously rhymed, "I used to be a stick-up kid/So I think of all the devious things I did"—hip-hop and hustling inhabited separate social spheres. Street guys went about their business and ignored the hip-hoppers; they considered rappers soft and not street savvy, while the rap business, which struggled to make money at start-up independent labels such as 4th and Broadway, Tommy Boy, and Def Jam, seemed to them a grind with no real payday in sight. Meanwhile, hip-hoppers, particularly those who were teenagers in the eighties like Irv, looked up admiringly at drug dealers. They had the money, the luxury cars, the jewelry, the girls, the respect of the streets, all of the accoutrements that would come to define hip-hop's "bling" lifestyle in the late nineties.

Hip-hop and hustling were worlds apart, but their denizens shared the same neighborhood and even the same blocks, especially in the place where Irv was raised, southeast Queens. During the eighties, the area was home to hip-hop pioneers such as RUN-DMC and Def Jam founder Russell Simmons, as well as notorious drug kingpins such as 'Preme and his homicide nephew Gerald "Prince" Miller; Lorenzo "Fat Cat" Nichols and his cop-killing lieutenant Howard "Pappy" Mason; and Thomas "Tony Montana" Mickens. It was one of the most violent epochs in New York history, and the next generation of rappers and hip-hop executives—Irv, his older brother Chris, Curtis Jackson (aka 50 Cent), and Jeffrey Atkins (aka Ja Rule) among them—had a front-row seat to watch the neighborhood's violence and criminality.

When the bottom fell out on hustling at the beginning of the nineties thanks to tough three-strikes sentencing; a rising body count from the crack wars; and law enforcement innovations such as COMPSTAT (a program that enabled cops to identify neighborhood trouble spots through computer-generated crime statistics and electronic mapping), hustlers looked to start a new life in hip-hop. Rappers, after all, had always been their most sympathetic audience. Hustlers became part of the ever-present hip-hop entourage or took on jobs as assistants, security guards, or managers. Hip-hop might have offered lower pay than hustling, but the risks associated with the streets were no longer worth the gamble.

It was a mutually beneficial relationship. Hip-hoppers needed hustlers to bolster their street cred, especially with the ascent of gangsta rap in the early nineties, which trumpeted values like real-ness and authenticity. Hip-hoppers inflated their street C.V.s (a stint pitching "nicks," or five-dollar bags of crack, became nearly as important as skills on the mic) and assumed the personas of their favorite hustlers (one of The Inc.'s rappers renamed himself "Ronnie Bumps" after a southeast Queens heroin dealer of the same name); or, more often, wrote songs cataloging the misdeeds of eighties street legends.

Hustlers from the crack era—particularly those who reigned in southeast Queens—thus became part of a permanent hip-hop narrative

On 50 Cent's "Ghetto Qu'ran (Forgive Me)" the South Jamaica-bred MC rhymed about nearly every iconic southeast Queens hustler, including 'Preme, Fat Cat, and Tony Montan and cited historic moments of their heyday such as the Supreme Team's brutal, execution-style slaying of Colombian cocaine distributors for a few kilos. On "Memory Lane (Sittin' Da Park)," Nas reminisced about how "some fiends scream about Supreme Team, a Jamaica Queens, thing" while on "The World Is Yours" he rhymed that he was "facin' time like 'Pappy' Mason." That Nas, who is from Queensbridge, not southeast Queens, would pay loyalty tribute to hustlers from far outside of his own neighborhood is telling. "They was legend myths," Irv says of southeast Queens hustlers, "like urban-legend myths."

The meeting of hip-hoppers and hustlers was a combustible one. Survival on the street requires realistic, unvarnished assessments of hustles (and fellow hustlers), whereas hip-hop thrives on a romantic belief in the outsize urban-legend myths. Irv's naiveté about the legal ramifications of his relationship with 'Preme—which began at a chance meeting on a video shoot in the drug kingpin's former stomping grounds in South Jamaica—ultimately led to his undoing. Though they were both raised in southeast Queens, Irv and 'Preme came from starkly different backgrounds. Irv is, by his own admission, "from a great family with mother and father, youngest of eight, never been convicted of a crime nor has anyone in my family been convicted of a crime." 'Preme, on the other hand, is an ex-con with numerous drug arrests on his record (including a conviction on a federal continuing criminal enterprise charge) and an extended family deeply immersed in the crack trade. For a while, the pair served each other's needs—Irv burnished his street cred while 'Preme polished his much-faded street rep and made some cash from his new hustle, hip-hop—but before long the feds were bearing down on them.

Even after the risks became clear, Irv never seemed able to separate himself from 'Preme. Just days after our sit-down, Troy Moore (the brother of 'Preme's street associate Tyrone "Tah-Tah" Moore) and a low-level southeast Queens stick-up kid named William Clark were shot outside the midtown Manhattan nightclub LQ where The Inc. hosted an album release party for Ja Rule's album *R.U.L.E.* Both men were shot with bullets from a .40 caliber automatic weapon; Moore survived a bullet wound to his stomach while Clark succumbed to gunshots to his buttocks and chest. Immediately after the shooting, law enforcement speculated that the killer (who still had not been caught as of late 2005) was looking to warn Tyrone "Tah-Tah" Moore against testifying in the investigation into The Inc. But Moore had publicly declared his intention never to cooperate with the government even after he was arrested, but never charged, in the shooting of a police officer in August 2003. "It would be stupid to send a message to a man who is not cooperating by hurting a member of his family," Moore's attorney Marvyn Kornberg told the *New York Daily News*. "Something like that is liable to make him want to get even."

On the streets—and even on hip-hop shock-jock Wendy Williams's popular radio program—a more plausible motive surfaced, one that didn't involve Irv or his record label. Moore and Clark were career criminals in their late thirties who, after ambushing hip-hoppers for their jewelry at numerous parties during the fall of 2004, fatally chose a mark who was willing to put up a fight. This theory was given some credence in July 2005 when anonymous law enforcement sources told *The New York Post* that just before the LQ party, Clark had robbed the brother of rapper Foxy Brown. Unfortunately for Ja, however, the *Post* also reported the

law enforcement suspected that one of his bodyguards was involved in the shooting and that he, like Irv, could face federal charges, including conspiracy to commit murder.

Justifiably or not, Irv found himself with another 'Preme-related stain, bringing even more unwanted attention to the already beleaguered Inc. camp. Real hustlers are accustomed to such cruel twists of fate, but Irv and Ja held on to a comic-book fantasy of Teflon dons who get away in the end, only to be celebrated by their loyal admirers. The story of southeast Queens and of any inner-city neighborhood is that hustlers almost always end up paying for their dominance on the streets with their lives or with lifelong prison sentences.

The hustlers of southeast Queens made nearly unprecedented sums of cash during their reign in the eighties and became heroes to hip-hop execs like Irv in the nineties, but their lives were far more complex than the one-dimensional portrayal of them by rappers such as 50 Cent, Ja Rule, or Nas. This is the story of the most iconic southeast Queens hustlers—Foxy Brown, Cat, Supreme, Pappy, Tony Montana, and Prince—and how they came to influence a new generation of hip-hoppers. It's not the myth celebrated, Cristal in hand, in hip-hop rhymes but a true-to-life history of southeast Queens hustlers as they were before they became the stuff of hip-hop lore: savvy CEOs of drug organizations with a lust for violence, drugs, and money that doomed not just them but the lucrative business model they created on the streets.

It is also the story of how many of the most significant events in hip-hop's recent history—the nonfatal shooting of Tupac Shakur at the Quad Studios in New York in 1994, 50 Cent's shooting in southeast Queens in 2000, the murder of Jam Master Jay in Queens in 2002, and the 50's high-profile rivalry with both Ja Rule and Los Angeles rapper The Game—have connections to the streets of southeast Queens. What emerges from this tale of hustling and hip-hop is the borough's enormous contribution to the evolution of hip-hop: Bronx DJs like Afrika Bambaataa and Kool Herc may have birthed the music in the seventies, but it was Queens impresarios and supergroups from Russell Simmons to RUN-DMC who commercialized the art form in the eighties and the neighborhood's hustling-obsessed rappers such as 50 Cent who made street credibility the most important ingredient for hip-hop success in the nineties and beyond.

Now, as Irv and Chris Lorenzo face as many as twenty years in prison on money-laundering charges and as 'Preme could be sentenced to death for charges ranging from drug trafficking to murder, the foundation of the hip-hop and hustling partnership is becoming increasingly shaky. The Lorenzo brothers are far from the first in the hip-hop scene to incur the wrath of law enforcement, but their indictment is a potent symbol of increased interest in the hip-hop business from the federal government: In the summer of 2005, rapper Lil' Kim was sentenced to one year in prison on three counts of perjury and one count of conspiracy for lying to a grand jury about a 2001 shooting outside New York radio station Hot 97; Kim's ex-boyfriend Damion "World" Hardy was indicted by U.S. Attorney Mauskopf on drug-trafficking and murder charges, including the killing of Darryl "Hommo" Baum, the Brooklyn stick-up king responsible for shooting 50 Cent in 2000; and news reports surfaced that the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York had begun an investigation into unsolved murders such as those of Tupac Shakur and Jam Master Jay. As rap has become drenched in the slang and style of the eighties drug business—one of the most popular mixtapes of 2005 was Harlem

rapper Juelz Santana's *Back Like Cooked Crack 2: More Crack* and one of the year's biggest hits was Cassidy's "I'm a Hustla"—the Lorenzos' case will test the marriage of hip-hop and hustling like never before. It's a relationship that has long driven hip-hop's hit makers from Dr. Dre to The Notorious B.I.G. and helped make the music palatable to suburban whites who vicariously experience dangerous neighborhoods like southeast Queens through the music of their favorite stars. (The fall 2005 release of a video game called "50 Cent: Bulletproof," in which players follow the rapper through New York's underworld, truly fulfills the promise of rap as role-playing.) But it's this long-held desire for street cred that is at last drawing the scrutiny of the federal government; and, obviously, it is the hip-hoppers themselves—not their mostly suburban fan base—who will face the consequences.

Part I:

HUSTLING

1 The Crews Coalesce

Southeast Queens lies at the farthest reaches of the borough, on the Long Island border, a neighborhood so far from Manhattan it might as well be another state. With its wide, almost interstate-like boulevards (Rockaway, Sutphin, Baisley, Guy R. Brewer) and its major parkways (Belt and Grand Central), southeast Queens has little in common with the crowded, narrow streets of Manhattan or even with the remote parts of outer boroughs like the Bronx and Brooklyn.

Though the area is just one small corner of the most middle-class, most immigrant-populated borough, it's not considered a single, unified neighborhood by anyone who lives there. No one says they're from "southeast Queens." This isn't a matter of pride. The area comprises a series of interlocking neighborhoods, each one distinct to its natives. Southeast Queens is home to some of the most sprawling housing projects in all of New York City, most prominently South Jamaica's Baisley Park Houses and the South Jamaica Houses, nicknamed the "40 Projects" because its cluster of tall brick buildings sits beside Public School 40. South Jamaica is composed mostly of public housing though one area, Jamaica Estates, is dominated by the middle class and is the birthplace of Donald Trump. Further to the south are the Springfield Gardens and Laurelton sections of southeast Queens, which are made up of blocks of middle-class housing developments that breed a professional class of doctors, lawyers, and accountants.

Then there is Hollis. Located just east of South Jamaica, the single-family homes of Hollis have for decades been a refuge for lower-middle-class African Americans fleeing the cramped conditions of poor neighborhoods such as the South Bronx and Harlem. Colin Powell's parents bought their first home, a three-bedroom bungalow at 183-68 Elmira Avenue, for \$17,500. The neighborhood, Powell wrote in his autobiography *My American Journey*, "carried a certain cachet, a cut above Jamaica, Queens and just below St. Albans, then another good coast for middle class blacks." Powell's African-American neighbors no doubt shared his lofty sentiments about Hollis; though many of the homes in the area were modest, single-level units, most had ample front and backyards and even basements, a rarity in inner-city neighborhoods, even in the outer boroughs. In Hollis, residents could feel like they were part of a neighborhood but could keep their distance whenever they needed to, just like in the suburbs.

By the mid-seventies, Hollis's luster began to fade: Spurred by the busing of blacks to white schools and the decay of New York City's infrastructure, panic selling of homes by whites

became commonplace, while gangs like Black Rain and Seven Crowns and drug distribution networks controlled by Mafia families flooded the neighborhood with heroin. Like many urban neighborhoods in America, Hollis had experienced a spike in cocaine use in the early seventies; heroin, however, was a far more dangerous epidemic, creating thousands of addicts and fattening the bottom line of drug organizations.

As the Mafia maintained a monopoly on heroin importation routes (the drugs originated in southeast Asia, were refined in Italy, and then smuggled to the United States), their profits were measured in the billions. With the heroin trade, the Mafia had the best of both worlds. Dealers and middlemen were forced to come to them for product so they could be choosy about which distributors they did business with, thus reducing the risk of being infiltrated by informants. On the other end, because there were no competing grades of heroin, customers didn't complain about heroin that was "stepped on," or cut with substances like baby powder.

Heroin ultimately ravaged the social fabric of southeast Queens.

Addicts were so abundant that senior citizens often shuttered themselves indoors for fear of encountering them. The neighborhoods rapid descent from small-town peace to inner-city mayhem took even law enforcement by surprise. "It used to be that drug dealers crawled out from under a rock and then went right back under that rock," explains former Queens Narcotics Detective Michael McGuinness, "but by the early eighties they weren't going back under the rock anymore." When dopers weren't getting a fix on the streets of southeast Queens they were sticking up bodegas or robbing houses (particularly in Hollis) for whatever they could get their hands on: TVs, household appliances, sneakers, even, ironically, guns tucked away in closets or sock drawers that were meant to protect residents from such intruders. Doped-up burglars with a particularly sick sense of humor (or an acute lack of shame) would often defecate in the toilets of their victims, leaving the foul mess for the homeowner to find.

Trips to the bank or a check-cashing store became treacherous: Dopers grabbed wallets and pocketbooks from customers the moment they walked out the door. When that breed of victim wised up, heroin addicts turned their sights on easier, but less lucrative markets, mugging Hollis teenagers for their coats or shoes. New York City jails soon became crowded with low-level thugs addicted to heroin.

Addicts who remained on the outside fell victim to predatory business practices from dealers. Success in the heroin business often required killing a few customers with too-pure product; instead of having a deterrent effect, overdoses attracted customers drawn to the potent new product. Heroin was a lucrative hustle, but in the rougher, more competitive sections of southeast Queens, dealing could be just as lethal as using. Most drug dealers would beat or slap around rivals, but heroin dealers famously had no qualms about murdering one another.

For those turned off by the violence, there were hustles far less dangerous than heroin in the seventies. Numbers running was a favorite scheme in southeast Queens; since law enforcement sometimes looked the other way from this seemingly victimless crime in return for bribes, numbers parlors flourished in the neighborhood.

Numbers shops were run by easygoing, affable businessmen with nicknames like "Grumpy" and "Chop," entrepreneurs more dedicated to customer service than most owners of bodegas.

and supermarkets in the neighborhood. Numbers runners set out doughnuts and coffee for gamblers and kept the floors immaculately clean. Best of all, hitting that winning number—the odds were often set at something like 600:1—provided a high no drug could match. (Indeed, the down payment on Colin Powells parents' Hollis home came from proceeds from a winning number.) Mafiosi involved in the heroin trade viewed numbers runners as the most trustworthy guys on the streets. They were also highly attuned to the tastes of their clients since hundreds of customers went in and out of the parlors, numbers runners had a good sense of the underground economy. How many people were into heroin? Coke? The numbers runners knew, and they helped the Mafia.

Unlike in the safer, more sedate world of numbers, steely nerves were a requirement for success in the dope business. No one personified the fearlessness of heroin hustlers better than Hollis native Ronald “Bumps” Bassett. Unlike his fellow dealers, Bumps didn't want adulation or notoriety; he was simply out for the cash. When he left his base on Farmingdale Boulevard in Hollis to hang out at the open-air drug bazaar of 150th Street in South Jamaica, all the young hustlers on the block would excitedly cry out, “*Hey, hey, Ronnie's over here*.” “They paid homage to Ronnie Bumps,” says one former Hollis hustler, “but he didn't care. He was a man among the boys.” Bumps looked the part, too: With his long mane of straightened hair, pale light brown skin, and reddish birthmark just above his mouth he was a dead ring for Ron O'Neal, the suave actor who played the cocaine kingpin nicknamed “Priest” in the classic 1972 blaxploitation film *Superfly*. Bumps was one of the first real icons of the emerging drug business in southeast Queens, and he would have imitators for decades to come.

The nihilism of the dopers and the flashiness of dealers like Ronnie Bumps served as the inspiration for the generation of hustlers who came of age in southeast Queens in the early eighties.

Without the experience or organizational skills of the street icons of the seventies, the new breed of mostly teenage hustlers started out small. The White Castle hamburger stand on Hollis Avenue and Francis Lewis Boulevard was robbed almost daily, and a depot for Mister Softee ice cream trucks in Queens Village provided another favorite target. Unsurprisingly, bitter feuds broke out among petty hustlers over the most lucrative marks in southeast Queens, battles that in turn led to the formation of organized crews in the neighborhood. “It became a competition,” remembers one former hustler raised in South Jamaica's 40 Project. “You had the guys from Hollis, you had the guys from Southside and then you had the guys from off Linden Boulevard. A lot of dudes from Hollis didn't like guys from over here because we were in the projects. And the guys from the projects didn't like the guys from Hollis because they lived in Hollis. It was just animosity.”

The rivalry between Hollis and South Jamaica was typical (in southeast Queens, Hollis is dubbed Northside; South Jamaica, Southside) but it was also based in class. South Jamaica hustlers were mostly poor and uneducated while in Hollis many attended private Catholic schools and went on to college. If Hollis, with its single-family houses and neat lawns, was something of a lower-middle-class paradise, South Jamaica was a lower-class hell of towering brick public housing projects that seemed to block out the sky, abandoned, burnt-out

buildings, and desolate stretches of blocks where everyone could feel as though they were alone in the area.

Even among the rough-and-tumble scene of South Jamaica, the hustlers from Linden Boulevard stood out. They were poor—many came from South Jamaica’s Baisley Park Houses—and frighteningly tough. They rushed headlong into fights with guns and knives drawn, sending even those with seasoned street pedigrees fleeing for their lives. “They used to come with guns and knives and all we had was our bare fists and a quarter to call somebody,” remembers the former 40 Projects hustler. “We got into a dispute with those guys in the cafeteria of Andrew Jackson High School and when the fight started we were quickly outnumbered. We barely escaped with our lives.”

There was one more striking difference separating the Linden

Boulevard posse from the rest of southeast Queens: religion. Many claimed affiliation with the Five Percent Nation, a splinter sect of the Nation of Islam (NOI) founded in 1963 by minister Clarence Edward Smith, aka Clarence 13X. Smith, whose followers called him Father Allah, rejected the belief that NOI founder Wallace Fard was God (“the black man is God,” he said), and believed that only 5 percent of the world’s population is righteous. “Peace, God” was how Five Percenters greeted each other, earning the Linden Boulevard crew the name the Peace Gods. To rival hustlers, their righteous-sounding names, like “Prince G” and “Born Justice,” only made them scarier.

One of the most promising young hustlers of the Peace Gods was Kenneth McGriff. Nicknamed “Supreme” or “’Preme” by his fellow Five Percenters (one of the sect’s tenets held that blacks were “Supreme Beings”), McGriff cut an outsize figure. Born on September 11, 1959, to transit-worker parents in the Baisley Park Houses, ’Preme carried himself with the swagger of older, more established hustlers in the game, dressing in expensive suits, leaving his crisp white shirt open to reveal a muscled chest. He also had a wide, easy smile, a manicured goatee that made him look like a movie star (or, as many in southeast Queens joked, like a porno actor), and most memorably, piercing green eyes. Behind the ghetto glitz was a seriousness about hustling that elevated ’Preme above his many peers on the street. He carefully studied the work of older, more experienced southeast Queens hustlers like Ronnie “Bumps” Bassett and even offered to take on some of the most dangerous and thankless tasks for his bosses, such as guarding drugs and cash at southeast Queens street houses. ’Preme was no street fighter, but he could turn to the Peace Gods, who like him embraced Five Percenter ideology less as a religion and more as a rebellious pose, for muscle. Rivals were well aware that crossing ’Preme invited an attack from the much-feared Peace Gods, giving ’Preme an air of invincibility on the streets of southeast Queens.

In 1981, ’Preme and a group of friends from the Baisley Park Houses formed a crew called the Supreme Team. The grandiose-sounding name was typical Five Percenter hyperbole, and in another nod to Five Percenter ideology the first members of the crew even called themselves the Original Seed. Yet ’Preme and his tight-knit crew did little more than sell small amounts of cocaine and heroin through hand-to-hand sales on the street. The Supreme Team, however, did undertake an important innovation: the merging of Latino and African American hustlers into one unified crew. ’Preme appointed Ernesto “Puerto Rican Righteous” Piniella one of his top lieutenants, thus ensuring the future participation of Latinos in the

Supreme Team, and more importantly, gaining a foothold in the Latino-dominated world of cocaine distribution. A Latino face in the Supreme Team could bring access to the Colombian who moved real weight and to the wholesale pricing that inevitably came along with big drug purchases. Piniella was also genuinely fearless. While Supreme Team members Chauncey “God B” Milliner and Nathan “Green Eyed Born” May often caved in to law enforcement pressure when they landed in jail, Piniella would serve his time without even placing a call for help. He was unafraid, too, to get his hands dirty on the streets, executing rivals and dumping the bodies in the outlying wooded areas of southeast Queens that were dubbed the “burial grounds.”

If the Peace Gods represented hustling at its most violent, Thomas Mickens’s crew—which plied their trade in the upper-middle-class neighborhoods of Laurelton and Springfield Gardens—were the drug game’s most professional players. Mickens inherited his street smarts from his father, Thomas “Lucky” Harris, one of southeast Queens’ most storied number runners. Though Mickens took his mother’s last name, the young hustler claimed to have received two separate inheritances from his father, one when he turned 18 and the other when he turned 21. Harris taught the young Mickens—a high school dropout who so lustred after the high life that he gave himself the nickname “Tony Montana” after Al Pacino’s character in *Scarface*—to abhor violence as bad for business.

He also instructed Mickens to keep the circle of hustlers around him tight, as small crews limited one’s exposure to informants. When Mickens began his hustling career in the early eighties when in his late teens, he heeded his father’s advice, selling cocaine in the vicinity of Merrick Boulevard and 226th Street, backed by fellow hustlers Norvell “Flakes” Young and Anthony Jacobs. At home, girlfriend Shelby Kearney managed Mickens’s finances and adjusted his tax returns to ward off IRS audits, claiming that Mickens held a job at an auto shop called Five Towns Auto and made most of his income from gambling.

There were other crews competing with Mickens and ’Preme; the most formidable was undoubtedly the Corley Family. Operating out of South Jamaica’s 40 Projects, the Corleys combined the business savvy of Mickens with the brawn of the Peace Gods. Indeed, like Mickens, the young hustlers of the Corley Family—brothers Peter Corley, Donald “Duckie” Corley, and James “Wall” Corley—came from a solidly middle-class background. The parents owned heating-oil trucks, which made for a lucrative business as the neighborhood single-family homes required substantial amounts of oil to get through the winter.

Like Mickens, the young Corleys inherited their parents’ strong business acumen. They sold heroin and cocaine from vacant apartments in the 40 Projects as well as from their nearby base of operations, the Corley Family grocery on 107th Avenue and 160th Street, ensuring a steady stream of customers from the cluster of towering brick high-rises. The Corleys mostly kept a low profile (though Wall was a regular in the southeast Queens nightclub scene) and the teenage hustlers they employed to hawk their product on 107th Avenue didn’t usually carry any drugs. After quietly taking a customer’s order, the dealers would call up to the second floor of the Corley Family grocery, and workers would drop bags of cocaine and heroin through a barely visible slot in the window. The immense stash of cash and drugs at the grocery was protected by a reinforced steel door as well as young 40 Projects toughs who strode the area around 160th Street intimidating anyone who might cross their path.

With the rise of the Corleys, the Supreme Team, and the Mickens crew, drug organizations seemed to be sprouting up in every corner of southeast Queens. Rivalries had existed between the loosely organized hustlers of Hollis and South Jamaica but the balance of power had never tipped in any one direction until 1981 when an ex-con and former Seven Crowns gang member named Lorenzo “Fat Cat” Nichols set up shop on 150th Street near 107th Avenue. The block was ideal for drug dealing—it forked off from Sutphin Boulevard, making it easier to conduct deals with a sense of privacy—and Fat Cat’s heroin and cocaine business took off almost immediately. The 150th Street and 107th Avenue site was also just ten blocks away from the Corley Family’s 40 Projects base; hustlers from every part of southeast Queens were shocked by Fat Cat’s boldness. It didn’t help that Fat Cat wasn’t a local—he was raised in the Ozone Park section of Queens—and that his background was in armed robbery, not drugs. (Just before going into business, Fat Cat had completed a five-year prison term for robbery.)

Born on December 25, 1958, to a mother employed as a nurse’s aide and a father who worked as a plumber, Fat Cat was given his nickname because of his linebacker-thick neck, head so big it nearly blocked out his friends’ faces in snapshots, and his rangy beard. Unsurprisingly, he had the brawn to back up his ballsy entrée into the southeast Queens street scene, administering brutal beatings with an icy, almost clinical precision. One story had Fat Cat knocking a man cold with one hand while talking on the phone with the other. “My father had a great knuckle game,” says Fat Cat’s son Raheem Tyler. “He even liked to box when business was slow.” No one in southeast Queens—not even hardened street hustlers—was eager to test him. To his immediate family, however, Fat Cat (whom they nicknamed “Biz” and “Busy”) could be a softie vulnerable to the feelings of others. “If you cry, you go to him,” said one member of the Nichols family. “He’d say, ‘Please stop crying, I’ll give you whatever you need.’ ” Fat Cat was also generous with the income he was generating for himself. “He’d hand out money to guys on the street and we’d be like, ‘Why are you doing that, Biz?’ ” remembers the family member. “And he’d say, ‘You never know when you’re gonna need someone in your time of need.’ ”

Although Fat Cat was a relative newcomer to southeast Queens, his reputation was growing to the point where he was becoming a threat to established players. One late summer night in 1981, a small army from the Corley Family surrounded Fat Cat while he was hanging out with friends at the Rollerdom Skating Rink on Jamaica Avenue. Fat Cat kept his cool, drawing his gun before the Corleys could make their first move, and shot Kilo, the Corley Family’s most feared enforcer, in the back. As Kilo crumpled to the ground, Fat Cat ran for the exits. A hail of bullets missed him as he swung the door of the Rollerdom open and hit the streets running. The Corley crew followed him out the door, and the shoot-out continued down to the 40 Projects, leaving hundreds of spent bullet casings all along the cracked sidewalks of southeast Queens. “It was like something out of the movies with guys shooting up and down 160th Street,” remembers one former Corley Family member. “I had to hide out in one of the buildings in the 40 Projects the whole night.” No one else was injured that night besides Kilo, but Fat Cat had managed to change the balance of power. Before his arrival in southeast Queens, no single crew was dominant. Fat Cat was now the preeminent hustler in the area, the boss among many (like ‘Preme) who considered themselves bosses. With such unchallenged power came immense responsibility: Fat Cat’s crew would soon become a

umbrella organization of sorts, doling out weight to smaller crews and even assisting them acts of violence.

With his street rep solidified, Fat Cat turned his sights toward expanding his drug business. He and his middle-aged mother, Louise Coleman, opened up Big Mac's Deli, a two-story storefront at 106-60 150th Street near Sutphin Boulevard featuring several upstairs apartments, as well as a game room several doors down at 105-06 150th Street. From these pair of locations, Fat Cat moved millions of dollars in cocaine, heroin, and later crack, even supplying weight to rival crews like the Supreme Team. Fat Cat's organization was all family. His mother, Louise Coleman, sold small amounts of coke and heroin from the game room. His wife Joanne McClinton "Mousey" Nichols worked as a drug courier; sisters Honey Nichols and Viola moved weight from crew to crew and managed Fat Cat's drug-packaging operation. Viola's husband Marvin "House Cat" House worked as a mid-level distributor; niece Marcy Nichols "Mott" Williams bagged drugs. There was only one real outsider in the hierarchy of Fat Cat's sprawling drug organization: Man Sing Eng aka "John Yee," an Asian heroin distributor whom the Nichols family nicknamed "Chink." Eng was so removed from day-to-day southeast Queens street life—he imported his heroin from Pakistan and only sold weight—that he was deemed trustworthy by Fat Cat.

To outsiders, a family-run drug-dealing business seems unusual, if not completely perverse. To insiders in the drug game, however, keeping business in the family makes perfect sense. Trusting your crew not to snitch or run off with cash and drugs is perhaps the most essential ingredient for success in the narcotics game. Whom can you trust more than your close family? Even the savviest players on the street can be brought down by an informant or someone whose bottom line take a hit when drugs are stolen by a disloyal crew member. Furthermore, while most are loath to admit it, it's a fact of the street life that parents are just as susceptible to the lure of fast cash as their children. "At first, the parents are horrified," says a former hustler close to the Nichols organization, "but once they see money coming in it's, 'OK, you can do this, just don't do it here.' Then it's, 'OK, I'll help you stash money or drugs.' Before you know it, the parents are part of the organization."

Fat Cat reluctantly allowed younger members of his family to work for him. "Biz had no problem counting money for him," explains Marcy (not her real name), a close relative of Fat Cat's, "but I think he was paying me so much—at one point I was making \$1,500 per week—so I just save up my money, get out of the game, and then leave New York." But he seemingly had no problem with sisters, cousins, nieces, and nephews holding important positions within his organization as long as they were adults. So confident was Fat Cat in his family's ability to handle business at Big Mac's Deli, which sat on one of southeast Queens's toughest corners, that he left the store without even basic security precautions even though the game room and the upstairs apartments were always packed with mountains of drugs and cash. "Fat Cat's grocery store was the only one on the block that had no bars on the windows," remembers Mike McGuinness of Queens Narcotics.

While he relied on his family for business, for serious acts of violence Fat Cat turned to his longtime friend Howard "Pappy" Mason, a dreadlocked tough from Brooklyn whom he met while imprisoned at a notoriously brutal prison for adolescents in the Bronx called the

Spofford Juvenile Center. Pappy was fiercely loyal to Fat Cat, possessed an almost visceral hatred of law enforcement, and seemed perpetually up for a fight—even with cops. “Cat liked to use guys from Brooklyn because it created a big element of surprise for the guys in Queens,” remembers a man close to the Nichols organization. “Everybody knew everybody in our neighborhood, so when these outsiders came in it just threw everybody off.”

Pappy had a strong mystique surrounding him. Because of his dreadlocks and his use of Jamaican street slang, street guys in Brooklyn and Queens believed he was from Jamaica when in fact he, like Fat Cat, actually hailed from Alabama. (Fat Cat was born there before moving to Ozone Park.) Pappy instilled in his subordinates—whom he dubbed the Bebos—an obsession with Jamaican culture. Like their boss, Bebos members sported dreadlocks and framed orders for everything from cocaine shipments to hits on potential witnesses with the Rastafarian phrase, “One Love.” Pappy and the Bebos sold cocaine and heroin in the 4 Projects (just blocks away from Fat Cats base at 107th Avenue and 150th Street), but Fat Cat nonetheless considered him an ideal lieutenant. Pappy kept his aspirations in check and even structured his organization to resemble Fat Cats crew. (Pappy’s mom, Claudia Mason, worked as a distributor and enforcer.) Indeed, to hustlers in southeast Queens the Bebos seemed like no more than a ragtag version of the Nichols organization.

Fat Cat ran his organization from a familiar business model. Like the heroin hustlers of the seventies, Fat Cat’s small army of drug dealers were “grindin’ ” (street slang for making dozens of small transactions worth \$10 to \$25 at a time) in poor neighborhoods like South Jamaica. Profits were sizable, but hand-to-hand dealers often had to work fifteen-hour days.

Thomas “Tony Montana” Mickens, on the other hand, was able to turn over his supply even much faster. He sold to upper-middle-class clients in Laurelton and Springfield Gardens; they bought cocaine by the ounce, so he could make thousands of dollars in profit in a single transaction. Mickens even had business cards printed up to impress his upscale clientele: They read TOMMY, ANY TIME with the phone number of his 231st Street home in Queens printed below his customer-friendly slogan. When Mickens wasn’t reachable at his house, he was often hustling at his spot at 226th Street and Merrick Boulevard.

Mickens’s direct involvement in the drug business soon left him vulnerable to law enforcement scrutiny. An undercover cop who infiltrated Fat Cat’s organization might arrest a runner or a lookout; with Mickens, the officer could get the boss himself in handcuffs. Indeed, one of his most consistent customers turned out to be an undercover cop from Queens Narcotics. In November 1982, the officer made his first buy on 226th Street and Merrick Boulevard, purchasing half an ounce of cocaine for \$1,250. After completing the transaction, Mickens was eager to set up another deal and handed the cop his business card. Soon after, he met up with the cop on 226th Street for another sale; but this time, Mickens urged his customer not to make a purchase. “I don’t have good quality stuff,” he explained to the cop. This kind of honesty was rare among most dealers but commonplace for the customer-friendly Mickens. “I don’t want to buy it if it’s not good quality stuff,” the cop replied, and the two set a date to meet again.

Their next meeting took place in February 1983, on 226th Street and Merrick Boulevard, as always. This deal, however, ended with the cop handcuffing Mickens and placing him under

arrest. Four months later, Mickens was sentenced to a short prison term. His girlfriend Shelby Kearney held on to his significant savings (upward of six figures) and he was released barely one year later in June 1984; almost immediately he hit his old spot on 226th Street again. He moved ounce after ounce of cocaine, and his cash grew larger by the day. Mickens envisioned houses, cars, yachts, everything his hero Tony Montana flaunted in *Scarface*. The arrest and subsequent prison time had taught Mickens that in order to achieve such lofty goals he'd have to be smarter than the average hustler. So he began to fashion elaborate schemes to protect himself from law enforcement scrutiny. In December 1984, an undercover cop purchased coke from Mickens near 226th Street. Believing that he had busted Mickens, the officer ran the license plates on the 1975 blue four-door Chevy Nova only to find that it was registered to a southeast Queens man named Robert Hines. Mickens registered the Nova in the name of his crew member so that a check of the plates by a cop would result in the arrest of Hines (who was more than willing to go to jail for his boss).

The ruse may have left Mickens one crew member short, but in the months after the arrest Mickens was free to focus on his organization's finances, moving the cash he'd socked away into legitimate businesses like real estate and retail. At the close of 1984, just as Mickens was put on parole for his drug arrest a year earlier, he and girlfriend Shelby Kearney closed on the sale of a home at 179 Hilton Avenue in Queens. It was an impressive accomplishment for a dealer barely in his twenties who'd ascended from the streets. The home also presented formidable challenges for Mickens, however, raising eyebrows among law enforcement and the IRS. On his tax returns, Mickens listed his employment as a worker with Five Towns Auto while Kearney claimed she was a word processor, not exactly jobs that would provide enough cash for the down payment on a home. Mickens moved about \$20,000 in cash to the bank account of Kearney's parents, who, unaware of how they were being used, wrote a "gift" check to the happy couple. Mickens then deposited about \$11,050 of his drug money into Kearney's bank account, which she converted into a \$12,000 check to use as a partial down payment on the home. Finally, Mickens gave a friend \$5,000 in cash, which Thompson used to write a \$5,000 "loan" check to the Mickens family to purchase the home in exchange for a fee. The flurry of checks may seem like an unsophisticated shell game now, particularly after the passing of legislation requiring that cash transactions over \$10,000 be reported to the IRS. But in the early eighties, Mickens's moves made him one of the savvier empire builders on the streets of southeast Queens, the rare young gun who saw beyond the limited gains of the street and into a limitless future.

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