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## INTRODUCTION

Best-selling mystery novelist Lisa Scottoline's 2005 *Devil's Corner* begins with a black male teenager, his hair in cornrows, holding a Glock handgun to the head of the main character, a female lawyer. The teen offender, a product of the Philadelphia ghetto, wears Iversons (Reebok-produced sneakers named after the ballplayer Allen Iverson), baggy jeans, and "a red satin Sixers jacket." Scottoline probably selected this look for her character because it would likely bring forth a familiar mental picture of a street thug in her readers' minds.

This stock image of a hoodlum fits with, and even helps explain, the depraved act being perpetrated. By aligning the teen's physical appearance with controversial Sixers star guard Allen Iverson, the author seals the connection between the character and criminality: the invented gun-wielding delinquent and Iverson, who has been arrested multiple times—including at least once on a gun charge—share the same hairstyle, sneakers, jeans' style, and team apparel and allegiance.

Precisely because many people reflexively associate both hip-hop fashion and Allen Iverson with unlawfulness, the National Basketball Association (NBA) no longer permits its players to dress in the way described above. Prior to the implementation of an off-court dress code for the 2005–06 season, the league's mostly young and black athletes usually dressed in one of two ways

over the last decade or so: hip-hop casual or hip-hop corporate. NBA chic meant that a player either looked like a wealthier, bejeweled version of Scottoline's fictional troublemaker or went instead with a snazzy, custom-fitted dress suit accented by shiny accessories — diamond earrings, watches with bezels, designer shades. A player with a sense of humor and notion of self-grandeur — someone like seven-foot-one Shaquille O'Neal of the Miami Heat — might, as a playful nod to his flamboyant predecessors who played in the funk- and Afro-centric American Basketball Association (ABA) days, throw in a top hat, cane, or loud suit color. With the announcement of the dress code, hip-hop corporate now pervades but in a toned-down, censored form: no chains or pendants outside the shirt; no headwear or sunglasses indoors; and — though they aren't explicitly mentioned — no canes.

NBA players who prefer the outlawed new-money hip-hop look celebrate an aesthetic they helped popularize along with a conspicuous cast of movers and shakers from the inner cities nationwide; they have ascended income brackets by legal or illegal means such as sports, entertainment (e.g., rap music), drugs, and gangsterism. In the interwoven circles of rap music, basketball, and drug culture, the hangouts, automobiles, ideology, jargon, and sexual partners of each group are frequently one and the same. For example, "Me against the World," a well-liked rap song by Tupac "2Pac" Shakur, functions also as a self-reliance mantra for embattled young black men and is a commonly found tattoo on hoopsters' bodies. Moreover, the notorious boss of Death Row Records, Marion "Suge" Knight, a major player in the Los Angeles underworld, is believed by many to have orchestrated Shakur's killing.

Although hip-hop had become institutionalized in the NBA as a meaningful part of players' lives and a commercial force essential to the NBA's standing in popular culture, the league, always careful in its handling of the genre, plainly changed its relationship to it. After a series of disparaging incidents — most glaringly a 2004 brawl in Detroit during which players on the Indiana Pacers tussled violently with the Pistons' fans on national television — the league took

a stand against hip-hop. With fan and player welfare, legal responsibility, and (most important) image at stake, the NBA introduced a series of housecleaning reforms for players—including random in-season drug testing, age limits, and mandatory etiquette workshops during the preseason. Featured in the league’s list of quality-of-life and safety adjustments was a ban on oversized jeans.

According to this logic, clothes were part of the problem. The NBA therefore needed to ban all banable symbols of hip-hop (prohibiting tattoos would certainly prove more difficult) because there was something treacherous about these items that was either impelling wearers to behave like criminals or impelling spectators to see the items as symptoms of a broader disorder and destructiveness.

Standout player Tim Duncan of the San Antonio Spurs didn’t understand why the NBA had infused clothing with such transcendent meaning. In an unlikely incendiary quip, Duncan, the league’s quietest and least hip-hop superstar, called the NBA dress code “retarded.” Duncan doesn’t dress hip-hop cool; he dresses comfortably, without actively using his clothing to make a statement. His outfit was now a concern, but for what purpose? Was he one person in a blazer and khakis and another in a low-hanging Jesus piece and do-rag? Clothing doesn’t actually make the man as advertisers and fashion magazines allege, does it? There’s no known correlation between fashion sense and common sense.

But there’s something more complicated going on here.

The New York Police Department profiles the city’s most successful rappers. It’s no secret that a section was created in the department to map out the rap world and monitor these musicians through secret surveillance. In 2004, Court TV’s thesmokinggun.com posted portions of a five-hundred-page dossier of mug shots, rap sheets, and incident reports of hip-hop heavyweights like Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and Ja Rule. The folder’s thickness reflects the alarming fact that most of the popular rappers in the area have criminal records (some

for serious charges, some for lesser ones; some before and some after rappers had become famous).

Such tracking by the police is an obvious attack on hip-hop and a seeming breach of civil rights. Yet defeating this probe is probably not the first personal liberties cause most people would champion, nor is such internal intelligence irrational from the police perspective. Big-name rappers have an unusually powerful cultural position and can influence world events, yet at the same time they are frequently figures of dubious legal standing: they often bait police with insults and threats or start beefs with rival rappers that have been known to unfold violently. Many rappers openly maintain ties to organized crime and street gangs, and drug dealing routinely finances rap label start-ups.

In a controversial book, *Out of Bounds: Inside the NBA's Culture of Rape, Violence and Crime*, Jeff Benedict found that 40 percent of NBA players active during the 2001–02 season had criminal records. (The statistic was based on documents available for 177 of the 417 American-born players listed on team rosters.) While one can debate the merits of Benedict's research—he doesn't distinguish between a player's being investigated and his being convicted, for example—and the accuracy of his findings given his small sample size, it is nonetheless obvious that the NBA has to confront criminality, the victims of which, specifically and sadly, are often women. Although NBA commissioner David Stern was critical of Benedict's work, the NBA has essentially reacted to the connection between hip-hop and the criminal culture in the same way as the New York Police Department. Because a substantial proportion of both rappers and ballplayers has been in trouble with the law, these two groups currently find themselves the targets of sweeping reactionary measures and, in the case of NBA players, a movement to separate them from their most obvious association with hip-hop: their clothing fashion.

Doesn't it behoove the NBA to more closely monitor the product it's selling and to protect its image? After all, it is a business, and a

sound business controls image and makes money while limiting liability.

From the NBA's vantage point, it doesn't matter if a connection exists between baggy clothing and criminality. According to Virginia Postrel, author of *The Substance of Style*, now more than ever consumers make purchases based on their aesthetic response to a product. Whether it is the lead performer in a play or an espresso machine, a customer invests in items that have the "right" appearance because of the values that customer intrinsically attaches to them. In an arena where many ticket buyers are higher-income white men in their mid-forties, the goal of the NBA as a business is to cater to the tastes of such ticket buyers and to attract companies advertising products aimed at this demographic. If these consumers, cognizant of their reactions or not, see a criminal when they see Carmelo Anthony of the Denver Nuggets on the sidelines in a flat-brimmed New Era cap, oversized white T-shirt, and droopy jeans, then it makes business sense to adjust his appearance.

In acting as a profit-minded enterprise, does the NBA advance a racist conflation between hip-hop clothing and violence that is not only unfounded but that also antagonizes the black labor force responsible for much of its financial success? Is the NBA affirming a devastating stereotype of the black male as a societal menace? Then again, isn't hip-hop in all of its incarnations—fashion surely included—about being provocative and undermining authority? Are the players, as Benedict's findings can be used to suggest, doing it to themselves? Regardless, the NBA is clearly guilty of having it both ways: it chastises players for looking or acting "too street" while it manipulates and sells their street-bred swagger for all its worth and cashes in on the celebration of its players and iconography in mainstream hip-hop. The NBA prohibits players from wearing trendy throwback jerseys during postgame press conferences but outfits them for games in uniform reissues to model an expanding inventory of merchandised apparel. The NBA can thank the rap world, from which it's rapidly distancing itself, for making retro team gear a fashion epidemic.

Ironically, the NBA, acting like an out-of-touch parent, weighed in too late with its announcement of a dress code and missed not only the boat but also the point: hip-hop polices its own fashion. Hip-hop's self-determined, always evolving style sense was already moving in a fresh direction long before the NBA worked the dress code into the new Collective Bargaining Agreement in the summer of 2005. Hip-hop trendsetters like Outkast, P. Diddy, and Jay-Z, applauded in such men's magazines as *Esquire* for their visionary understanding of high-end fashion, had already been telling their followers, at least for a couple of years, to put away the big jerseys and "go dressier," more sophisticated, more businesslike (but, of course, to do so with flavor). California-based Élevée Fine Clothing estimated recently that it had been customizing suits for 50 percent of the NBA *before* the league-mandated fashion makeover.

There's a major difference between black fashion leaders guiding a change in the preferred look of young black men and a white authority structure determining what is and is not permissible. Moreover, with more than eighty foreign-born players on team rosters at the start of the 2005–06 season, new looks and trends were naturally arriving through the sport's globalization.

The dress code and issues related to it have absolutely nothing to do with the game of basketball—the on-court parts of the sport, the in-game action. Unlike rule changes like the addition of a three-point line or permitting a zone defense, the dress code is designed exclusively to change what happens off the court—that is, its purpose is to affect image. Image is what much of basketball is about—looking good, bad, safe, edgy, cool, tough—and the manipulation, ownership, and selling of image is the contested terrain between the league and its players. The overall image of basketball has changed dramatically over the last thirty years or so. Since the 1970s, both amateur and professional men's basketball have become enormously more important and interesting. Basketball is America's most exciting sport not because of its dynastic teams, sublimely talented players, or most thrilling buzzer-beaters, but because of the emer-

gence of a transcendent culture of the game, complete with values and symbols; aesthetics and styles; and economic, political, and racial dynamics. Race in basketball, still basically a black and white category, is a particularly rich and revelatory subject, encompassing (among other things) tensions between black players and white owners and managers; the peculiarity of white minds—commentators and writers—thinking and talking about black bodies; the definitions and self-fulfilling expectations of black and white masculinity; and the overt and latent prejudices and fetishes of fired-up fans.

In addition to reflecting trends in society, the culture of basketball influences the everyday. Regular people shadow ballplayers in numerous ways—in dress: jerseys, warm-ups, and Air Jordans have become street clothes; in talk: “finish strong,” “fourth-quarter mentality,” and “I can take that guy” are part of the general vocabulary; in thinking: a free-agent attitude pervades the workplace and little showmen perform in the classroom; and in views of the future: the ubiquitous but illusory hoop dream is a practical goal for young people.

Focusing primarily on the NBA, in this book I explore six case studies that collectively tell the true, gritty story of basketball’s last thirty-plus years. These highlight the players, coaches, institutions, and events that have shaped the culture and politics of basketball while impacting and reflecting American life and popular culture. Taken together, these accounts show how and why basketball has changed, how it takes from and gives to the rest of our culture, and where it all leads.

## 1

## Can't Knock the Hustle

### *Individualism in Hip-Hop, Hoops, and the Drug Culture*

*There are two non-music-driven threads that I think play crucial roles in the story of hip hop, by both affecting and reflecting it: drugs and basketball. It's no coincidence that hip hop germinated in the economics of Ronald Reagan's America and that rap seemed to draw on the same strength and vitality that crack sapped. On any given inner-city day, drug dealers—who commit crimes, make money, and influence wardrobes—ply their destructive trade within feet of basketball courts where dreams of public glory, mad loot, and innovative, idiosyncratic style are dearly held. Sometimes the dealers and the players are the same people . . . torn between hoop dreams and immediate green. Sometimes they are friends, both stars in their local 'hood.*

**Nelson George**, from *Hip Hop America*

*About 6.5 percent of Cadillac buyers are black, but 19 percent of Escalade buyers are black. Six players on the Golden State Warriors professional basketball team have an Escalade. Of the six top draft picks for the Green Bay Packers and Denver Broncos football teams, five bought Escalades with their new riches.*

*At least 10 rap songs, including one by Jennifer Lopez, mention Escalade. In music videos and live performances, rappers often drive Escalades.*

*Cadillac dealers say they sometimes toss teenagers out of showrooms because they spend too much time fawning over Escalades after school.*

**Earle Eldridge**, *USA Today*, October 23, 2001

Hip-hop music, the NBA, and crack dealing became central parts of the American consciousness in the 1980s. In black ghettos nationwide, disenfranchised youth channeled their energies into one or more of these three worlds in the hopes of rising above poverty and transforming their invisible existence into a life of glamour, excitement, and wealth. Today, hip-hop, the NBA, and drug dealing (no longer confined to crack but encompassing a range of less lethal products) drive much of American popular culture while specifically defining both possibility and cool for young black males stuck in the 'hood. Making hip-hop music, playing professional basketball, or selling drugs is particularly thrilling in that each represents not simply a way out, but also a way in: access to a fantasy world of fame, cash, and suddenly interested women. No time need be wasted toiling in the mundane or dealing with the hardships of being poor while slowly earning money through boring, low-level work.

The story of a high-profile rap star/NBA player/neighborhood drug lord (choose one) sitting in the VIP section of an exclusive night club is sold as quickly on the block as it is on television. Facing the desperation of ghetto living and contemporary black culture's obsession with quick wealth, black teenagers often blindly chase the dream of making it big in hip-hop, basketball, or drugs. For the overwhelming majority, it's a foolish endeavor. The risks are dangerously high and the probability of breaking through is painfully low. But in the absence of other models of success, black teenagers still go for the basketball model or the rap model or the crack model because in many cases they are able to reconcile the recklessness and the absurdity. Young black males often recast themselves as participants in a game rather than everyday people living in the real world. Instead of a real-life pursuit, the dream is a game to be played.

As in any game, there are rules and strategies, winners and losers. The "true" players—those who have made it—have beaten the competition. In pursuing their dream the young seekers decided somewhere along the line that while almost all of the other black boys following the same goal will fail, they will succeed. And the

winners in the rap game, the NBA game, and the crack game have all learned that the road to success is taken alone. Savage individualism, an unshakable and absolute faith in and commitment to self, is the only way to the top.

A 2003 issue of *Rolling Stone* features an article on hip-hop superstar 50 Cent, with a black-and-white shot of the rapper squeezing imaginary gun triggers with both index fingers. The accompanying caption—“When 50 signed his contract, his first purchase was crack”—is a reference to how the former drug dealer spent his \$5,000 cash advance from Columbia Records. In the photo, 50 has on a headband with an NBA logo. A month before the issue came out, 50 was busted outside of a New York City nightclub after police found two handguns in his SUV. At the time of the arrest, 50 was dressed for layup lines in New York Knicks warm-ups.

The incestuous relationship of hip-hop, basketball, and the drug culture cannot be overstated. A typical hip-hop video features a rap star outfitted in contemporary or vintage NBA gear—jersey, warm-ups, headband—boasting of a distinguished drug-dealing past and a penchant for smoking marijuana. Sometimes basketball stars even make cameos: Los Angeles Lakers forward Lamar Odom, who has violated the NBA’s drug policy, dances nonchalantly in rapper Jada-kiss’s “Knock Yourself Out.” In rapper Mike Jones’s 2005 hit video for “Flossin’,” fellow Houston luminary and Rockets star guard Tracy McGrady leans against an expensive car, checking out the girls in the neighborhood and approvingly flashing Jones a peace sign. The five-foot-nine Jones went from standout high school guard to successful drug dealer to record label owner and chart-topping lyricist. Chris Webber and Allen Iverson, Philadelphia 76ers teammates and two of basketball’s biggest names, have each recorded rap albums, and each has been arrested for marijuana possession. Rap pioneer Snoop Dogg, who contends that he was once recruited to play hoops by the University of Nevada–Las Vegas (UNLV, a perennial NBA feeding ground), was recently named “Man of the Year” by *High Times*.

No one at UNLV has ever substantiated Snoop's claim. In the fall of 2005, Snoop led the "Save Tookie" campaign, aimed at sparing the life of California death row inmate Stanley "Tookie" Williams, who in 1971 founded the Crips, a notorious Los Angeles drug mob, before authoring from his cell children's books on the hazards of gangbanging.

In the mid-1990s, Tupac Shakur, arguably the most cherished figure in hip-hop, starred in *Above the Rim*, a film about a promising Georgetown recruit who teeters between hoop dreams and hustling. Shakur plays a neighborhood drug boss who tries to lure a talented high schooler (played by Duane Martin) over to the criminal side by getting him to play on a hoops team he assembles for a local tournament. The tournament is modeled after the legendary blacktop showdowns at Rucker Park in New York City's upper Manhattan.

Rucker Park has been the site of the famed Entertainers Basketball Classic (EBC) since the early 1980s, and it hosted some of the most celebrated street basketball matchups decades before that. Founded by rappers, the EBC is New York City's flagship summer hoops league, bringing together elite amateur and professional talent. Athletes battle for bragging rights before an overheated, raucous crowd egged on by megaphoned announcers calling for a "scrubstitution" to replace "coach's son." Rap impresarios from Suge Knight to Sean "Puffy" Combs (now Diddy) to Jay-Z, a former pusher, have sponsored EBC squads at one time or another.

The EBC is all about street credibility. Legendary EBC coach Tony Rosa explains, "You've got NBA guys there because they want to be known in the 'hood. An NBA player . . . goes from city to city and the connection with the fans feels so distant—the fans are white, most of the players are black—I'm sure they love the adulation but there's something about the 'hood: everybody wants to be known in the 'hood. Kobe came through; Shaq came through because it's important to them." Like the streetballers pining for an NBA contract and the cash and validity that come with it, the NBA players want the coveted of-the-people legitimacy that the local street heroes enjoy. Why else would the pros violate their contracts, risk career-threaten-

ing injuries, or—even worse—suffer the monumental embarrassment of being outplayed on the notoriously uncontrolled blacktop? What happens on the block is forever meaningful to the streets' native sons, even if they've moved on to NBA careers and sprawling suburban estates.

Rappers, too, coming to the tournament quickly learn where they stand in the 'hood. Jermaine Dupri, a top-selling record producer who wisely raps only occasionally, found out the hard way that his style was too pop, too pretty for the hard-core Rucker contingent. Said Rosa, "Hood fans: they know when you're real and when you're not, they know when you're fronting and when you're not."

On a recent summer day at the EBC, Dupri, who took his street acceptance as a given, aggressively joined in the local banter, heckling, coaching, and riding the refs from the sidelines. The fans exposed Dupri as a phony playing to the crowd. They rode him mercilessly for his tight white T-shirt, calling for the garment's return to its rightful owner, rapper Bow Wow, Dupri's pint-sized teenaged protégé. One creative attendee put a baby's shirt on a stick and passed it over to Dupri for the producer to put on. Clearly Dupri misplayed his first visit to the tournament. According to Rosa, "instead of just sitting there and relaxing and enjoying everything, he wanted to play coach . . . Those people, they let you know whether they like you or not. Other [rap] people got good receptions."

Nearly every mainstream rap song routinely references basketball or some part of the drug culture. Some rap lyrics mention known basketball players. On his hit single, "Hot in Herre," Nelly propositions a girl to dance on his basement strippers' pole and then, if she's not into the idea, dismisses the request as "kidding like Jason" (that is, Nets point guard Jason Kidd). Jay-Z, on a track from *The Black Album*, aspires to stack his money so high that it trumps the expanse of six-foot-seven Scottie Pippen's wingspan. The seemingly endlessly extending limbs of the former Chicago Bulls forward helped make him one of the better defenders of his day.

Other rap lyrics reference heated hoops rivalries. Phife Dawg, one

third of A Tribe Called Quest, warns rival mcs that he'll take their "heart[s]," just as Michael Jordan did to an outmatched John Starks during the historic but completely one-sided 1990s playoffs between the Bulls and the Knicks. Rappers frequently invoke moments of infamy in basketball history to make a point. Jay-Z equates his competitors with former University of Kentucky center Sam Bowie and himself with Jordan, recalling the 1984 draft debacle during which the short-sighted Portland Trail Blazers notoriously passed on Jordan (who went third) and took the bigger but less talented Bowie as their second pick. Rap duo Mobb Deep, in violent hyperbole, claims to have strangled more people "than Sprewell."

Drug-related allusions similarly abound. There are dreamy scenarios of stoner wishes (Nas shares his fantasy for the legalization of marijuana in "If I Ruled the World [Imagine That]"), declarations of devoted drug consumption (the Beatnuts are so persistent in their weed smoking that "like a stewardess," they're always "high"), and boastful proclamations of drug-selling feats (Biggie brags that he outsold Johnson and Johnson in his days of allegedly dealing "powder").

The worlds of basketball, rap music, and drug dealing have co-opted each other's vocabularies. "Selling out" is missing a layup, going pop, or ratting someone out to the cops. A "baller" might be an adept basketball player, an accomplished rapper, or a crack dealer with a thriving business. Those playing ball, making records, or expanding their street clientele are "hustlin'," "playin'," or "slingin'"; they're "gettin' theirs." A "dime" is an assist in basketball, a perfect female (i.e., Bo Derek "10") in hip-hop parlance, or the quantity/price of a bag of dope on the street. To "lock down" can mean to prevent an opponent from scoring in basketball, or to incarcerate, or to lose one's independence at the hands of a controlling girlfriend or boyfriend.

In basketball, encounters between opposing players or teams are increasingly described in the macho terminology of the drug trade or contemporary rap music. When the Lakers swept the Nets in the