You may love him or loathe him, but you have to take him seriously. O'Shea Jackson—better known by his nom de micro- phone, Ice Cube—may be the most successful “hardcore” rap artist in the recording industry. And his influence as a trendsetter in black youth culture is unrivaled. According to some academic analysts, Ice Cube qualifies as an “organic intellectual” (in Antonio Gramsci’s famous phrase): someone organically connected to the community he would uplift.

He is, at the same time, an American success story. It was as a member of the Compton-based rap group NWA that he first came to prominence in 1988 at the age of 18. Less than two years later, he left the group over a dispute about money, and went solo. Amerikkka’s Most Wanted, his gritty debut album, went platinum—and the rest is recording history.

Ice Cube is also a multimedia phenomenon. Artless, powerful performances in films by John Singleton and Walter Hill have established him as a commanding screen presence. That, combined with his streetwise credibility, has been a boon for St. Ides malt liquor, which has paid generously for his ongoing “celebrity endorsement.” Naturally, it’s a relationship that has aroused some skepticism. While Public Enemy’s Chuck D, for example, has inveighed against an industry that exacts a tragic toll in America’s inner cities, even suing a malt liquor company that used one of his cuts to promote its product, Ice Cube defends his role in touting booze in the ’hood—even though, having joined the Nation of Islam, he says he’s now a teetotaller. “I do what I want to do,” he says of his malt liquor ads.

Some of his other celebrity endorsements have raised eyebrows as well. For example, at the end of a press conference last year, Ice Cube held up a copy of a book entitled The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews, which purports to reveal the “massive” and “inordinate” role of the Jews in a genocidal campaign against blacks. “Try to find this book,” he exhorted, “everybody.”

But then Ice Cube is no stranger to controversy, and his second album Death Certificate has certainly not been without its critics. The album, which has sold...
over a million copies, delivers a strong message of uplift and affirmation . . . unless you happen to be female, Asian, Jewish, gay, white, black, whatever.

So, for instance, in the song "No Vaseline," Ice Cube calls for the death of Jerry Heller, his former manager, and imagines torching NWA rapper Eazy-E for having "let a Jew break up your crew." In "Horny Lil' Devil," Cube speaks of castrating white men who go out with black women. ("True Niggers ain’t gay," he advises in the course of this cut.) In "Black Korea," he warns Korean grocers to "pay respect to the black fist, or we'll burn your store down to a crisp." You get the picture. Not exactly "It's a Small World After All."

Still, Ice Cube's champions—and stalwart defenders—are legion. "I have seen the future of American culture and he's wearing a Raiders hat," proclaimed the music critic James Bernard. "Cube’s album isn’t about racial hatred," opined Dane L. Webb, then executive editor of Larry Flynt's Rappages. "It’s about have-nots pointing fingers at those who have. And the reality for most Black people is that the few that have in our communities are mostly Asian or Jewish. And when a Black man tells the truth about their oppressive brand of democracy in our community, they 'Shut 'Em Down.' "

"When Ice Cube says that NWA is controlled by a Jew," Chuck D protested, "how is that anti-Semitism, when Heller is a Jew?" The journalist Scott Poulson-Bryant pointedly observed that most of Cube's critics are unconcerned when he advocates hatred and violence toward
other blacks. “All the cries of Ice Cube’s racism, then, seem dreadfully racist themselves,” he argued. “Dismissing the context of Death Certificate’s name-calling and venom, critics assume a police-like stance and fire away from behind the smoke screen.”

Not all black intellectuals have been as charitable. Thus Manning Marable, the radical scholar and commentator, questions the rap artist’s “political maturity and insight” and insists that “people of color must transcend the terrible tendency to blame each other, to emphasize their differences, to trash one another. . . . A truly multicultural democracy which empowers people of color will never be won if we tolerate bigotry with our own ranks, and turn our energies to undermine each other.”

And what of the legendary Angela Y. Davis? In some ways, hers, too, was an American success story, but with a twist. Raised in Birmingham, Alabama, Davis went on to graduate magna cum laude from Brandeis University and work on her doctorate under Herbert Marcuse at the University of California, San Diego, and teach philosophy at the University of California, Los Angeles. In a few short years, however, her political commitments made her a casualty of the government’s war against black radicalism: the philosopher was turned into a fugitive from justice. In 1970, by the age of twenty-six, she had made the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted List (which described her as “armed and dangerous”) and appeared on the cover of Newsweek—in chains.

Now a professor in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Davis has made her mark as a social theorist, elaborating her views on the need for a trans-racial politics of alliance and transformation in two widely cited collections of essays, Women, Race, & Class and Women, Culture, & Politics. Cautioning against the narrow-gauged black nationalism of the street, Davis is wont to decry anti-Semitism and homophobia in the same breath as racism. “We do not draw the color line,” she writes in her latest book. “The only line we draw is one based on our political principles.”

So the encounter between them—a two hour conversation held at Street Knowledge, Cube’s company offices—was an encounter between two different perspectives, two different activist traditions, and, of course, two different generations. While Davis’s background has disposed her to seek common ground with others, these differences may have been both constraining and productive. Davis notes with misgivings that Death Certificate was not released until after the conversation was recorded, so that she did not have the opportunity to listen to more than a few songs. She writes: “Considering the extremely problematic content of ‘Black Korea,’ I regret that I was then unaware of its inclusion on the album. My current political work involves the negotiation of cross-cultural alliances—especially among people of color—in developing opposition to hate violence. Had I been aware of this song, it would have certainly provided a thematic focus for a number of questions that unfortunately remain unexplored in this conversation.”

Angela Y. Davis: I want to begin by acknowledging our very different positions. We represent different generations
and genders: you are a young man and I
am a mature woman. But I also want to
acknowledge our affinities. We are both
African Americans, who share a cultural
tradition as well as a passionate concern
for our people. So, in exploring our dif-
fences in the course of this conversa-
tion, I hope we will discover common
ground. Now, I am of the same gener-
ation as your mother. Hip-hop culture is
a product of the younger generation of
sisters and brothers in our community. I
am curious about your attitude toward
the older generation. How do you and
your peers see us?

Ice Cube: When I look at older people,
I don’t think they feel that they can learn
from the younger generation. I try and
tell my mother things that she just
doesn’t want to hear sometimes. She is so
used to being a certain way: she’s from
the South and grew up at a time when the
South was a very dangerous place. I was
born in Los Angeles in 1969. When I
started school, it was totally different
from when she went to school. What she
learned was totally different from what I
learned.

AYD: I find that many of the friends I
have in my own age group are not very
receptive to the culture of the younger
generation. Some of them who have
looked at my CDs have been surprised to
see my collection of rap music. Invari-
ably, they ask, “Do you really listen to
that?” I remind them that our mothers
and fathers probably felt the same way
about the music we listened to when we
were younger. If we are not willing to
attempt to learn about youth culture,
communication between generations
will be as difficult as it has always been.
We need to listen to what you are
saying—as hard as it may be to hear it.
And believe me, sometimes what I hear
in your music thoroughly assaults my
ears. It makes me feel as if much of the
work we have done over the last decades
to change our self-representations as Af-
rican Americans means little or nothing
to so many people in your generation. At
the same time, it is exhilarating to hear
your appeal to young people to stand up
and to be proud of who they are, who we
are. But where do you think we are right
now, in the 1990s? Do you think that
each generation starts where the preced-
ing one left off?

The war against gangs is
a war against our kids

IC: Of course. We’re at a point when we
can hear people like the L.A. police chief
on TV saying we’ve got to have a war on
gangs. I see a lot of black parents clapping
and saying: Oh yes, we have to have
a war on gangs. But when young men
with baseball caps and T-shirts are con-
sidered gangs, what these parents are do-
ing is clapping for a war against their
children. When people talk about a war
on gangs, they ain’t going to North of
Pico or Beverly Hills. They are going to
come to South Central L.A. They are go-
ing to go to Watts, to Long Beach, to
Compton. They are going to East Oak-
land, to Brooklyn. That war against
gangs is a war against our kids. So the
media, the news, have more influence on
our parents than we in the community.
The parents might stay in the house all
day. They go back and forth to work.

N A P P Y  H A P P Y  1 7 7
They barely know anybody. The gang members know everybody up and down the street.

**AYD:** During the late sixties, when I lived in Los Angeles, my parents were utterly opposed to my decision to become active in the Black Panther Party and in SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]. They were angry at me for associating myself with what was called “black militancy” even though they situated themselves in a progressive tradition. In the thirties, my mother was active in the campaign on behalf of the Scottsboro Nine—you know about the nine brothers who were falsely charged with raping three white women in Scottsboro, Alabama. They spent almost all of their lives in prison. My mother was involved in that campaign, confronting racism in a way that makes me feel scared today. But when she saw me doing something similar to what she had done in her youth, she became frightened. Now she understands that what I did was important. But at the time she couldn’t see it. I wish that when I was in my twenties, I had taken the initiative to try and communicate with my mother, so that I could have discovered that bridging the great divide between us was a similar passion toward political activism. I wish I had tried to understand that she had shaped my own desire to actively intervene in the politics of racism. It took me many years to realize that in many ways I was just following in her footsteps. Which brings me to some observations about black youth today and the respect that is conveyed in the popular musical culture for those who came before—for Malcolm, for example. What about the parents of the young people who listen to your music? How do you relate to them?

**IC:** Well, the parents have to have open minds. The parents have to build a bond, a relationship with their kids, so Ice Cube doesn’t have control of their kid. They do. Ice Cube is not raising their kid. They are.

**AYD:** But you are trying to educate them.

**IC:** Of course. Because the school system won’t do it. Rap music is our network. It’s the only way we can talk to each other, almost uncensored.

**AYD:** So what are you talking to each other about?

**IC:** Everybody has a different way. My first approach was holding up the mirror. Once you hold up a mirror, you see yourself for who you are, and you see the things going on in the black community. Hopefully, it scares them so much that they are going to want to make a change, or it’s going to provoke some thought in that direction.

**AYD:** Am I correct in thinking that when you tell them, through your music, what is happening in the community, you play various roles, you become different characters? The reason I ask this question is because many people assume that when you are rapping, your words reflect your own beliefs and values. For example, when you talk about “bitches” and “hoes,” the assumption is that you believe women are bitches and whores. Are you saying that this is the accepted language in some circles in the community?
That this is the vocabulary that young people use and you want them to observe themselves in such a way that may also cause them to think about changing their attitudes?

**IC:** Of course. People who say Ice Cube thinks all women are bitches and hoes are not listening to the lyrics. They ain’t listening to the situations. They really are not. I don’t think they really get past the profanity. Parents say, “Uh-oh, I can’t hear this,” but we learned it from our parents, from the TV. This isn’t something new that just popped up.

**AYD:** What do you think about all the efforts over the years to transform the language we use to refer to ourselves as black people and specifically as black women? I remember when we began to eliminate the word “Negro” from our vocabulary. It felt like a personal victory for me when that word became obsolete. As a child I used to cringe every time someone referred to me as a “Negro,” whether it was a white person or another “Negro.” I didn’t know then why it made me feel so uncomfortable, but later I realized that “Negro” was virtually synonymous with the word “slave.” I had been reacting to the fact that everywhere I turned I was being called a slave. White people called me a slave, black people called me a slave, and I called myself a slave. Although the word “Negro” is Spanish for the color black, its usage in English has always implied racial inferiority.

When we began to rehabilitate the word “black” during the mid-sixties, coining the slogan “Black is beautiful,” calling ourselves black in a positive and self-affirming way, we also began to criticize the way we had grown accustomed to using the word “nigger.” “Negro” was just a proper way of saying “nigger.” An important moment in the popular culture of the seventies was when Richard Pryor announced that he was eliminating “nigger” from his vocabulary.

How do you think progressive African Americans of my generation feel when we hear all over again—especially in hip hop culture—“nigger, nigger, nigger”? How do you think black feminists like myself and younger women as well respond to the word “bitch”?

**IC:** The language of the streets is the only language I can use to communicate with the streets. You have to build people up. You have to get under them and then lift. You know all of this pulling from on top ain’t working. So we have to take the language of the streets, tell the kids about the situation, tell them what’s really going on. Because some kids are blind to what they are doing, to their own actions. Take a football player—a quarterback. He’s on the field, right in the action. But he still can’t see what’s going on. He’s got to call up to somebody that has a larger perspective. It’s the same thing I’m doing. It’s all an evolution process. It’s going to take time. Nothing’s going to be done overnight. But once we start waking them up, opening their eyes, then we can start putting some-
thing in there. If you start putting something in there while their eyes are closed, that ain’t doing no good.

AYD: Your first solo album, Amerikkkka’s Most Wanted, went gold in ten days without any assistance from the radio and the normal network, and went platinum in three months. Why do you think young sisters and brothers are so drawn to your voice, your rap, your message?

IC: The truth. We get a lot of brothers who talk to a lot of people. But they ain’t saying nothing. Here’s a brother who’s saying something—who won’t sell himself out. Knowing that he won’t sell himself out, you know he won’t sell you out. We have a brother who ain’t looking to get paid. I’m looking to earn, but I’m not looking to get paid. You have a lot of people out there just looking to get paid. We’ve got a lot of people in the position of doing music, and all they want to talk about is “baby don’t go, I love you,” “please come back to me,” and “don’t worry, be happy.”

AYD: I am interested in what you’ve said about the difference between side A and side B.

IC: Death Certificate is side A. Most people liken it to “gangster rap.” “Reality rap” is what it is. Side A starts off with a funeral, because black people are mentally dead. It’s all about getting that across in the music. A lot of people like the first side. It’s got all that you would expect. At the end of the first side, the death side, I explain that people like the first side because we’re mentally dead. That’s what we want to hear now. We don’t love ourselves, so that’s the type of music we want to hear. The B side—which is the life side—starts off with a birth and is about a consciousness of where we need to be, how we need to look at other people, how we need to look at ourselves and reevaluate ourselves.

AYD: Let’s talk about “party politics.” When kids are partying to your music, they are also being influenced by it, even though they may not be consciously focusing on what they need to change in their lives.

IC: I wouldn’t say my music is party music. Some of the music is “danceable.”
But a lot of it is something that you put on in your Walkman and listen to.

AYD: But what kind of mood does it put you in? Isn't it the rhythm, the beat that captures you, that makes you feel good?

IC: You should feel good when you learn it.

AYD: I have talked to many of my young friends who listen to you and say, “This brother can rap!” They are really impressed by your music, but they sometimes feel embarrassed that they unthinkingly follow the lyrics and sometimes find themselves saying things that challenge their political sensibilities. Like using the word “bitch,” for example. Which means that it is the music that is foregrounded and the lyrics become secondary. This makes me wonder whether the message you are conveying sometimes escapes the people that you are trying to reach.

IC: Well, of course it’s not going to reach everybody in the same way. Maybe the people that are getting it can tell the brother or the sister that ain’t getting it. I think what my man’s trying to say here is called breakdown. You know what I’m saying? Once you have knowledge, it is just in your nature to give it up.

AYD: I took your video—“Dead Homies”—to the San Francisco County Jail and screened it for the sisters there who recently had been involved in a series of fights among themselves in the dorm. They had been fighting over who gets to use the telephone, the microwave, and things like that. The guards had constantly intervened—they come in at the slightest pretext, even when somebody raises their voice. Your video, your song about young people killing each other, provided a basis for a wonderful, enlightening conversation among the women in the jail. They began to look at themselves and the antagonisms among them in a way that provoked them to think about changing their attitudes.

IC: Let me tell you something. What we have is kids looking at television, hearing the so-called leaders in this capitalist system saying: It’s not all right to be poor—if you’re poor you’re nothing—get more. And they say to the women: You got to have your hair this way, your eyes got to be this way. You got to have this kind of purse or that kind of shoes. There are the brothers who want the women. And the women have the attitude of “that’s what we want.” I call it the “white hype.” What you have is black people wanting to be like white people, not realizing that white people want to be like black people. So the best thing to do is to eliminate that type of thinking. You need black men who are not looking up to the white man, who are not trying to be like the white man.

AYD: What about the women? You keep talking about black men. I’d like to hear you say: black men and black women.

IC: Black people.

AYD: I think that you often exclude your sisters from your thought process. We’re never going to get anywhere if we’re not together.
IC: Of course. But the black man is down.

AYD: The black woman’s down too.

IC: But the black woman can’t look up to the black man until we get up.

AYD: Well why should the black woman look up to the black man? Why can’t we look at each other as equals?

IC: If we look at each other on an equal level, what you’re going to have is a divide.

AYD: As I told you, I teach at the San Francisco County Jail. Many of the women there have been arrested in connection with drugs. But they are invisible to most people. People talk about the drug problem without mentioning the fact that the majority of crack users in our community are women. So when we talk about progress in the community, we have to talk about the sisters as well as the brothers.

IC: The sisters have held up the community.

AYD: When you refer to “the black man,” I would like to hear something explicit about black women. That will convince me that you are thinking about your sisters as well as your brothers.

IC: I think about everybody.

AYD: We should be able to speak for each other. The young sister has to be capable of talking about what’s happening to black men—the fact that they are dying, they’re in prison; they are as endangered as the young female half of our community. As a woman I feel a deep responsibility to stand with my brothers and to do whatever I can to halt that vicious cycle. But I also want the brothers to become conscious of what’s happening to the sisters and to stand with them and to speak out for them.

IC: We can’t speak up for the sisters until we can speak up for ourselves.

AYD: Suppose I say you can’t speak up for yourselves until you can also speak up for the sisters. As a black woman I don’t think I can speak up for myself as a woman unless I can speak up for my brothers as well. If we are talking about an entire community rising out of poverty and racism, men will have to learn how to challenge sexism and to fight on behalf of women.

IC: Of course.

AYD: In this context, let’s go back to your first album. I know that most women—particularly those who identify with feminism or with women’s movements—ask you about “You Can’t Faze Me.” Having been involved myself with the struggle for women’s reproductive rights, my first response to this song was one of deep hurt. It trivializes something that is extremely serious. It grabs people in a really deep place. How many black women died on the desks of back alley abortionists when abortion was illegal before 1973? Isn’t it true that the same ultraright forces who attack the rights of people of color today are also calling for the criminalization of abortion?
Women should have the right to exercise some control over what happens to our bodies.

AYD: What do you think about the “don’t do drugs” message you hear over and over again in rap music? Do you think that it’s having any effect on our community?

IC: Maybe, but it’s message without action.

AYD: Message without action?

IC: We’ve got to start policing and patrolling our own neighborhoods. There’s got to be a day when we go into the drug house and kick down the door. Snatch the drug dealer, take his drugs. Destroy his drugs. Take the money and put it into the movement. That’s what we gotta do. We can’t dial 911, call Sheriff Bill or Deputy Tom who don’t care about the community or the drugs.

AYD: But where are the drugs coming from?

IC: Oh, it’s coming from them.

AYD: So don’t you think that Bill will always be able to find someone who will be able to do their dirty work?

IC: Yes, but there’s got to be a time when we say: You can do your dirty work but you’re not going to do it here. You are not going to occupy our court.

AYD: Let’s get back to your music. Would you say that you’re trying to raise people’s consciousness?

IC: We get the minds open so we can start feeding into them, break down. The mind revolution has to go on before anything happens.

AYD: So how does the song “Us” help us to achieve this mind revolution?

IC: It makes us look at ourselves again.

AYD: Talk about that.

IC: “Us” is a record saying: Look at who we are. Let’s look at ourselves. Because every time you look at the other man you’ve got to look at yourself, too. See how we reflect him. They fight each other, that’s why we fight each other. He’s still in our mind. No matter how much we deny it, he’s still in our mind. As long as we accept this mentality, we’re going to do exactly what the slave did when the master said “I’m sick,” and the slave said, “We’re sick.” The house is burning and he tries to throw water on the house faster than the slave master does. They put us in this trap. Now we’re living just like they’re living.

AYD: What is the role your music plays in assisting young people to develop an awareness of the self-hatred that they have grown up with? Whether you like it or not, you’re out there as a teacher.

IC: My job is to teach what I know and then point to my teacher.

AYD: And then there will be the sister or brother who listens to you and who
will use your message as the basis for teaching somebody else.

IC: Of course. And then they will point that someone else to their teacher, and then I'll point them to my teacher.

AYD: So what you’re talking about is education.

IC: Of course, the revolution.

AYD: So education is the mind revolution.

IC: That’s right, education is the mind revolution.

AYD: There’s a long tradition of music as education and of situating education at the center of our social struggles. Frederick Douglass, for example, talked about how important it was for enslaved black people to educate themselves. Because once they began to educate themselves they would no longer be slaves.

IC: But we wouldn’t educate ourselves: we wanted the slave master to educate us.

AYD: But we created our own schools. Immediately after the abolition of slavery, we began to create our own schools.

IC: But you’re still being taught by the slave master. Because whoever’s the teacher had to be affected by slavery in one way or another. Reverend Pigfeet ain’t giving us what we need to know. He’s not telling us what we need to know about who we are. He telling us about the life after this one. Why can’t we have heaven right here? Why can’t we have heaven here and heaven in the life after?

AYD: What do you think about our African American history, and the contemporary lessons we can learn from our history? I raise this question because we often fail to grasp the complexity of our own culture. The comment you just made about the role religion has played in our history has also been the basis for an unfounded criticism of the spirituals that were created and sung by slaves. When, for example, slaves sang “Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home,” they may have appeared to be evoking freedom in the afterlife, but wasn’t it true that they were also singing about Harriet Tubman—the chariot, Harriet, who rescued so many women and men, helping them to discover freedom in this life? How do we remember what came before us? How do we maintain a historical memory that helps us to build on the accomplishments and insights that came before us—even if we adopt a critical attitude toward those accomplishments. How do we avoid reinventing the wheel over and over again? As a rap artist, what do you think about the images and icons representing historical personalities that abound in hip-hop culture? Take Malcolm, for example.

IC: Malcolm’s a student. You don’t know about Malcolm until you go to Malcolm’s teacher.

AYD: I know that as a result of rap music young people, especially young African Americans, became interested enough in Malcolm to read his autobi-
ography. This is important, because there is a generation between my generation and yours who didn’t know who Malcolm X was—had never heard of him. Now the younger generation at least knows his name, has read the autobiography, and perhaps knows a little of the surrounding history. The question I want to ask you is whether you think it is necessary to probe more deeply into our history, to go beyond the music, as many young people have been stimulated by the music to read Malcolm’s autobiography? And especially to look at the women who have still not become a part of our collective historical memory. To look, for example, at Ida B. Wells, the black woman who was the single most important figure in the development of the campaign against lynching. To encourage, for example, an awareness of this woman who traveled all over the country sometimes nursing her baby on stage, organizing throughout the black community, in villages and towns. Ida Wells was responsible for black people realizing that we can stand up and say that we were not going to allow the Ku Klux Klan to deliver tens of thousands of brothers and sisters into the hands of lynching mobs . . .

IC: Like I said, you’ve got to go to the teacher. Malcolm was a student. You’ve got to teach all these kids that they can become Malcolm, but you’ve got to go to the teacher. Malcolm can teach you what he knows, but he should point you in the direction of the teacher. Same thing with me and my process. I’m just now starting to look at the Nation of Islam. That’s how I’ve learned all that I know, indirectly. So in “Watch Out” at the end of my record, I point to my teacher.

AYD: Continuing the discussion of your latest album, what is “Lord Have Mercy” about?

IC: “Lord Have Mercy” is like a prayer, but it’s a rap song. This song evaluates the situation and asks the Lord to help us in our struggle. It’s saying, when he sends down the ladder, don’t forget us.

AYD: Where do the ideas expressed in this song come from?

IC: They come from my belief in God. Today, they say you’ve got to go to a church. I think I’ve been to a church six times in my life. A church should not be like—shhhh quiet, you’re in a church—you know what I mean?

AYD: But there are some churches that don’t require you to be quiet. In the African tradition, a church is a place where you dance, you move, you sing, where you celebrate in a collective spirit.

IC: Yes.

AYD: Also, in our history, the church is the site where we organized and planned our rebellions.

IC: But we could have done that anywhere.

AYD: What do you mean we could have done it anywhere?

IC: I mean we could have done it anywhere—in the house . . .

NAPPY HAPPY
AYD: I'm talking about slavery. The religious gathering was the only place we had that was collective and not subject to surveillance. The church had to become a lot of things. That's why ministers became social, political leaders. I know there are a lot of your “Reverend Pigfeet” around. But there is also another tradition . . .

IC: But now, in the 1990s, are they real leaders?

AYD: What do you think about Reverend Jesse Jackson?

**I don't believe Jesse Jackson is a leader. I call him “Messy Jesse”**

IC: I should say this to him in person, though I don’t know when I’m going to see him. But I call him “Messy Jesse.” I don’t believe Jesse Jackson is a leader. I don’t look at him as a leader. I look at him as a follower, but he’s following the wrong leader. I’m a follower, but I believe I’m following the right leader.

AYD: Well, what do you think about running for political office in more general terms? Jesse Jackson’s claim to leadership is based on the fact that he ran twice for president on the Democratic ticket.

IC: That’s cool, as long as you don’t become a puppet. As long as you don’t become a token. I look at him, the relationship between him and Minister Louis Farrakhan. The FOI [Fruit of Islam] security was protecting Jesse with their lives and Jesse publicly denounced Farrakhan, at the same time that he was meeting with Farrakhan behind closed doors, in the alley, in the back ways of South Side Chicago. Around the same time, he shook hands with George Wallace. How can you not talk publicly to a man who protected your life, but shake hands on TV with a man who murdered your people?

AYD: Are there any black politicians you respect—who you feel are doing a good job? Take Ron Dellums for example. During the late sixties, he was elected to the Oakland City Council and then to Congress based on the work he did in defense of the Black Panther Party.

IC: I really don’t follow politicians. I really can’t talk to a politician who would hold up the flag.

AYD: What about the ones who don’t?

IC: Who don’t hold up the flag? Are they down for the movement? Down to get our people right? Or are they using them as a stepping-stone for themselves?

AYD: I would say that there are a few—like Dellums and Maxine Waters—who are not out for themselves, but for the people. But people shouldn’t expect them to accomplish anything progressive without the community demanding it. The election of Maxine Waters to Congress was an important moment in our history. A progressive black woman, solidly backed by her community, whose record as an elected official...
in California is as strong as it can get. People in South Central Los Angeles can vouch for that. We also need organizers.

**IC:** Of course, our leaders are organizers.

**AYD:** Often the leader or the spokesperson can’t do everything, and we don’t often give credit to those who do the backstage work of organizing. It’s unglamorous work, it is not work that people read about. And who usually does that work? Who usually does that housework of the movement?

**IC:** The people do that work. They need a sense of direction. That’s all we need to give our kids—is a sense of direction, a goal that you want them to meet, that you demand them to meet. So then the housework gets done.

**AYD:** But that work requires you sometimes to learn the skills necessary to do it. You have to learn how to do it.

**IC:** You have to be taught, you need guidance, direction.

**AYD:** Take Rosa Parks, for example. People usually think of her only as the woman who refused to sit in the back of the bus in 1955. According to the myth—memorialized in the Neville Brother song “Sister Rosa”—she was tired. But she had been tired for a long time and was therefore not only motivated by her feelings. She made a conscious political decision, as an organizer. Rosa Parks is a woman who helped pull the community together, who therefore did the work of the backstage organizer. We need to learn how to respect those who do that behind-the-scenes work in the same way that we respect the orators, the theorists, the public representatives of the movement. Often, the people who do the organizing, the people who don’t get credit for their work are women. Everybody knows Dr. Martin Luther King as the public representative of the civil rights movement, but not very many people know that it was a group of women who organized the boycott in Montgomery. If it hadn’t been for them, nobody would have ever known who Dr. King was. Shouldn’t we pay tribute to those women, whose names are known by only a few of us, and realize that we need organizers in the tradition of the Montgomery women today as well?

**IC:** You have people who fight for integration, but I’d say we need to fight for equal rights. In the schools, they want equal books, they don’t want torn books. That was more important than fighting to sit at the same counter and eat. I think it’s healthier if we sit over there, just as long as we have good food.

**AYD:** Suppose we say we want to sit in the same place or wherever we want to sit, but we also want to eat food of our own choosing. You understand what

**There’s the chicken and the chicken hawk. They are enemies by nature. That’s what we got to instill in our kids**
I’m saying? We want to be respected as equals, but also for our differences. I don’t want to be invisible as a black woman. I don’t want anyone to tell me I have to eat like white people eat, or have the same thoughts, or do my academic work only in the tradition of Western European philosophy. Which doesn’t mean that I am not interested in Western philosophers, but I am also interested in African philosophical traditions and Asian and Native American philosophies . . .

IC: It’s all about teaching our kids about the nature of the slave master. Teaching them about his nature, and how he is always going to beat you no matter how many books you push in front of him, no matter how many leaders you send to talk to him, no matter how much you try and educate him. He’s always going to be the same way. We’ve got to understand that everything has natural enemies. There’s the chicken, and the chicken hawk. The ant and the anteater. They are enemies by nature. That’s what we got to instill in our kids.

AYD: Would you say that there are creatures who are “friends by nature.” As human beings, how do we recognize our friends? Shouldn’t we be friends with Native Americans?

IC: Oh yes. But that isn’t who I’m talking about. You have people trying to love their enemy. That’s where the problem is: trying to get them to accept us, trying to get them to “get together” with us. It has never been the intention of the government of the United States to integrate white and black people.

AYD: It may be the government’s intention today to integrate a certain kind of black person into the power structure—the Colin Powells and the Clarence Thomases . . .

IC: What everybody thought would work is not working. What you have is people who go to school and go to college, and they are running from their people when their people need them the most.

AYD: Speaking of school, what do you think about the fact that in some schools, rap music is being academically studied. My niece Eisa is a student in Harvard. She wrote her junior thesis on rap music. So what do you have to say about the way hip-hop culture is now being examined and analyzed in the context of university studies?

IC: Rap music is a school system itself, and one of the best school systems that we have. It’s entertainment, but it’s also a school system. Right now we are more unified on the surface than we have been. I’m not just saying that we know the

I’m nappy happy.

You know what I’m saying?

I’m nappy and happy

same thing, but the brothers that got the bald head in New York are the same people that got the bald head in Mississippi, the same brothers who got the bald head in Los Angeles. All over, we’re starting to know the same thing, we’re starting to say: Hey, we’re trying not to identify with the slave master. Putting

Opposite Photo by Pamela Sprengsteen
the contacts in, the jheri-curls in, trying to be like somebody you shouldn’t ever want to be like, ain’t cool. Cut 'em off. Take 'em out.

**AYD:** Is that why you cut off your jheri-curl?

**IC:** yes, that’s why I cut off my jheri-curl. I was trying to identify with the slave master. I like it now. I’m nappy happy. You know what I’m saying? I’m nappy and happy.

**AYD:** So am I.

**IC:** You know that’s the thing that we got to break down. We’ve got to break that down, and start teaching about ourselves, and stop teaching us about who they are. They learned civilization from us. Once you instill that in black kids and let them know who they are and who we are, all the problems will start improve.

**AYD:** So what responsibilities do we have to Africa? South Africa for example?

**IC:** We can’t help South Africa. That’s just like the blind leading the blind. We can’t help them because we can’t even help ourselves.

**AYD:** If you were to talk to Nelson Mandela, he would say that the solidarity of African Americans has been extremely important. The work of anti-apartheid activists here was certainly not the primary factor that led to Mandela’s release, because black people inside South Africa had been fighting for his freedom for twenty-five years. But Mandela himself has said that if it hadn’t been for the fact that we organized a powerful anti-apartheid movement here in the United States, it would have taken them much longer to get to where they are now. If we don’t do what we can—and I would say that African Americans have a special responsibility here—to continue to encourage a political consciousness in favor of an end to the white regime and for a free and democratic South Africa, it will probably take them a lot longer to achieve these goals. My position is that we need to stand up and say no.

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**AYD:** So what responsibilities do we have to Africa? South Africa for example?

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**AYD:** So what responsibilities do we have to Africa? South Africa for example?

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If they don’t love themselves, how are they going to love me and you? We need an organization that teaches them to love themselves.

AYD: How do we build this organization? Although I personally doubt that history can be repeated, there are people who say that we need another Black Panther Party. They point out that during

the late sixties there was an abundance of gang violence between some of the same gangs that are around today in South Central Los Angeles—the Bloods, the Cripps, etc.—and the Black Panther Party eliminated gang antagonisms. The more widespread the influence of the Black Panther became, the more the gang structure began to collapse. I can say from personal experience that it was empowering to witness young black people give up gang violence and begin to respect each other, regardless of their neighborhood allegiances.

AYD: Well, people didn’t know that then.

IC: But now we do.

AYD: I’m not arguing that we need another Black Panther Party, because I think that would be a simplistic solution. History is far more complex. Each generation has to find its own way. You are standing on our shoulders and it is up to you to reach much higher.

IC: And somebody is going to end up standing on ours, and build something better than what we had. It’s all about having a Black Panther Party, just making a more advanced Black Panther Party. Do you know what I mean? A more organized Black Panther Party. That’s the key. More people in the party.

AYD: Would you say that your music calls upon young people to move from a state of knowing, a position of being educated, to a state of doing and a position of political activism, a position of transforming this society?

IC: Yes, of course. To me, the best organization around for black people is the Nation of Islam. It is the best organization: brothers don’t drink, don’t smoke, ain’t chasing women. They have one job. They fear one person, though I wouldn’t say it’s a person—they fear Allah, that’s it.

AYD: What about the women in the Nation?

IC: They fear Allah. Don’t drink, don’t smoke. Know who they are. Love

To me, the best organization around for black people is the Nation of Islam

NAPPY HAPPY
themselves. Respect themselves. Love each other, respect each other. You know what I mean? That’s what we need. But we don’t need no Rodney Kings. I mean we won’t have that incident. You pull your piece and try to take my brother’s life, you going to have to take all of our lives. That’s how it’s got to go.

AYD: What is the difference, as you see it, between your role as an artist and your role as a political teacher—as a purveyor of political consciousness? You create and perform your music and at the same time you have a political agenda. How do you negotiate between the two positions?

IC: It is very delicate. I can’t preach, so to speak, because I don’t want to turn people off. I have to walk a thin line. I have to sneak the message in there until they open up. When they open up is when I get to shove. You know how you open babies’ mouths? Until they open up, you can just get a taste on their lips, but when they do open up, you just put it in there. It makes them feel good inside.

AYD: So what can we expect from you as an artist, as a musician?

IC: It’s going to be raw. I’m starting to get that baby’s mouth open. Now it’s all about me learning and studying so I can know the right thing to put in it—and so I can know more as a person. I have to learn more as a person before I can pass it on to the kids who are buying my music.