Then and Now: From Gangster to Gangsta

Depending on when you were born, you’re likely to have very different images spring to mind when you hear the word gangster. In the early twentieth century, few people personified the term better than Al “Scarface” Capone, the Chicago gangster and boss of the Chicago Outfit who made a name for himself in the illegal trafficking of alcohol during Prohibition. The public has always been interested in the lure of mob stories, with movies and television shows like The Godfather and The Sopranos ranking among the most popular ever produced.

Today, however, the media seems more inclined to discuss gangsta, the genre of rap that fans argue is the sincere art of people raised in poverty and violence. Gangsta rap became especially popular in the early 1990s, with artists like Dr. Dre earning mainstream success with songs about guns, sex, and drugs that resonated both with inner-city and suburban kids. Since then, the gangsta image and vocabulary perseveres with groups like Three 6 Mafia, who won an Academy Award in 2005 for the song, “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp,” from the film Hustle & Flow. In fact, much of the way hip-hop is marketed or covered in the news presents many parallels with the coverage and image of organized crime of one hundred years ago.

While gangsta is now most prominent as a source of entertainment, discussion of it as a threat to morality and the rule of law is as prevalent now as this same discussion was in the days of Al Capone. Likewise, a parallel exists in the anxieties critics feel about the prominence some European immigrants achieved through organized crime and the mainstream success that African Americans have achieved in the entertainment industry. As one group of disenfranchised Americans has adopted some of the imagery made popular by other groups of disenfranchised Americans, how much of the adoption of the mythos of the gangster has to do with crime and how much has to do with identity and success?
WRITING

1. Write an essay in which you compare the stereotypes of the gangster with those of the gangsta. What features do they have in common? Where do the characteristics diverge?

2. Write an essay in which you discuss why books, films, and music about criminals seem to fascinate so many of us. Do you think the reasons people enjoy mob stories so much has anything in common with why people enjoy rap music?