



The Dozens: A History of Rap's Mama

Elijah Wald

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Following his groundbreaking explorations of the blues and American popular music in *Escaping the Delta* and *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll*, Elijah Wald turns his attention to the tradition of African American street rhyming and verbal combat that ruled urban neighborhoods long before rap: the viciously funny, outrageously inventive insult game called "the dozens."

At its simplest, the dozens is a comic concatenation of "yo' mama" jokes. At its most complex, it is a form of social interaction that reaches back to African ceremonial rituals. Whether considered vernacular poetry, verbal dueling, a test of street cool, or just a mess of dirty insults, the dozens has been a basic building block of African-American culture. A game which could inspire raucous laughter or escalate to violence, it provided a wellspring of rhymes, attitude, and raw humor that has influenced pop musicians from Jelly Roll Morton to Ice Cube. Wald explores the depth of the dozens' roots, looking at mother-insulting and verbal combat from Greenland to the sources of the Niger, and shows its breadth of influence in the seminal writings of Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston; the comedy of Richard Pryor and George Carlin; the dark humor of the blues; the hip slang and competitive jamming of jazz; and most recently in the improvisatory battling of rap. A forbidden language beneath the surface of American popular culture, the dozens links children's clapping rhymes to low-down juke joints and the most modern street verse to the earliest African American folklore.

In tracing the form and its variations over more than a century of African American culture and music, *The Dozens* sheds fascinating new light on schoolyard games and rural work songs, serious literature and nightclub comedy, and pop hits from ragtime to rap.

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