

[REDACTED] | [REDACTED]

MIND-FUCK

I want you to travel with me to a prison known simply as: Savage-ville. It is a massive concrete and iron human warehouse encompassed by 40 foot walls. Its sub-human conditions often starring on Nat Geo's, "World's Worst Prisons." Notice the despair and fear floating in the sad dead eyes of row after row of caged young black men. Join me as we attempt to navigate this shadow community.

Now you are among them as a recently convicted felon unready to serve a sentence of at least 25 years -- super max prisons only house inmates with at least 25 years to serve -- most will never leave. As a middle-aged, middle-class, educated white man you don't yet comprehend the gang-controlled hierarchy or convict code. You have neither any social nor cultural connection to the majority of your fellow convicts beyond being of the same human race.

You have been behind your steel door for several days. You have paced your four feet of space in your gray, austere, concrete box just like the thousands before you. Suffered indignities perpetuated by the guards tasked with your protection. Fought against the mind games by the predators seeking prey. Choked down 3 insipid meals a day, slipped through a hole in your cell door like an animal. Endured freezing five minute showers in rust stained, mold infested cages once a week. Anxiously talked on the phone to estranged loved ones on your allotted ten minutes a week; they have so many questions...you have few answers. As night comes you begin to realize you're falling deeper into the well. Every day the light becoming dimmer. You ponder the easy way out. The coward's solution, you know, but even a rock turns to dust with enough time and pressure.

Then you hear someone rapping a deep lyrical rhythm. It comes every night after lights out, over and over. You think you are going crazy from fear and stress. You wonder if everyone can hear it? You think, how can anyone make music in this place? And, why? You lie in the void and ponder until your anxiety-ridden exhaustion overtakes you. Then the count lights flicker, the clickity-clack of the food cart returns, and you open your eyes. Your nightmares are no match for your new reality.

I went to Savage-ville for a crime as far away from me as suicide, something I could never imagine myself ever committing. I have always maintained that crimes against women even God would not forgive. And yet, here I rot, among other weak men who didn't have the power to say no to their addictions and demons.

Prison was a mind-fuck. I had to learn a new code of living and even a whole new language. Everything intrigued me, especially the late night rap sessions. It took me several days to decipher the lyrics, months to truly understand their meaning. They were narrative sages of lives from a street culture I really didn't know. These rap sessions were common on their streets, every day aspiring rap artists are making Youtube music videos in the hopes of attaining some local celebrity. Rapping is a part of the young, gang sub-culture out on the streets which carried over to their nightly sessions. These were their stories of the game of life on the hustle -- of pain and dreams. It was their version of current history and a reflection of their truths. It is how they carry and hold onto their culture. It was my first real awareness of how different cultures can co-exist so closely and yet be world's apart.

We all grow up with music and rap is mainstream now, but do we ever think about its historical and cultural importance? Its ability to bridge gaps or about how it connects us? Prison time is a type of death -- dead yet unburied, or are we buried yet undead? -- yet, these raps live on passed from one inmate to another, from one generation to another, carried with as much care as any precious memory we hold dear. These are more than just music. They are the soul, prayers, and history of a marginalized people struggling to be heard.

I hear you.

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By Leo Cardez