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Still Hanging in the 'Hood; Rappers Who Stay Say Their Strength Is From the Streets

By CHARISSE JONES

The young men blend together on the Staten Island street corner, a blur of baggy T-shirts and blue jeans. They smoke and laugh like any neighborhood crew. But under one baseball cap, you'll find a rap star.

"I could leave, move out of the neighborhood, but the neighborhood is still in me," said Jason Hunter, the rapper, better known as Inspektah Deck of the platinum-selling rap group Wu-Tang Clan. "I stay in my neighborhood because the people there, they keep me in touch with where I'm from. Park Hill is like my bloodstream."

For many rap artists, the decision whether to stay or leave is difficult. Stardom may mean a mansion far from the humble surroundings where many of their lives began, or a more secure environment for their families. But performers struggling to keep their creative edge, and credibility with their audiences, are pulled by the communities where their talent took root. So many have chosen to stay.

But remaining in the old neighborhood can bring a new set of problems: the jealousy of former friends and the feeling of not quite belonging anymore. Many rap performers have chosen an uneasy compromise, moving to more comfortable neighborhoods that give them easy access to their old turf.

Some rappers, like Snoop Doggy Dogg, have been criticized for rapping about poverty and urban violence, yet living like millionaires in suburbs miles away. "It has a lot to do with the credibility," said Havelock Nelson, a columnist for Billboard magazine who often writes about rap. "Even if you don't live in the neighborhood, you've always got to go back to make sure you're keeping it real."

But many rappers argue that they have as much right as anyone to prosper and live where they choose. The rapper Ice-T lives in the Hollywood Hills, while Speech of Arrested Development lives in the upscale suburbs of Atlanta.

Those who have stayed in their old neighborhoods say their reasons have nothing to do with the expectations and pressures of others.

They stay because they hear their muse on the stoops of Flatbush, Brooklyn, and in the streets of Hollis, Queens. They buy homes near childhood haunts because their parents never moved, and neither did their schoolyard friends. They stay because when they are home, they don't have to posture and pose.

"Where is there to go where I would feel natural," said Edward Archer, 23, a rapper known as Special Ed, who was raised in Flatbush and now lives only blocks away in Canarsie. "This is what I know. This

is what I was raised around. I don't feel the need to go somewhere else, feel uncomfortable and have to start all over again."

Mr. Archer, 23, has rapped on the soundtrack of Spike Lee's "Crooklyn" and appeared on "The Cosby Show." But he chose to open his recording studio in Brooklyn. And he bought an apartment five minutes from the house where he was raised.

On a recent Tuesday afternoon, Church Avenue pulsated with the thump of dance hall reggae. But when Mr. Archer was a teen-ager, hip-hop was the siren call. He answered, rapping on the steps, in the hallways, in the park. At 16, he had his first hit record, called "I Got It Made."

When he tells his memories to a stranger, rhymes mingle with recollections of stickball and cheese doodles, sweet girls and passers-by, floating by his parents' house as they exited the No. 2 train.

People often ask why he has stayed.. Occasionally, he even asks himself, "late at night, when I'm driving and I'm just looking at the environment."

Then he remembers. "There might be better scenery" somewhere else, he said. "But it doesn't outweigh staying, because my foundation and my people are here."

Still, Mr. Archer admitted, he is not the fellow he used to be. Age and musical success have opened his eyes. Yet, as much as he has changed, the neighborhood has stayed the same, and sometimes he is reminded of the chasm.

"I'm not really concerned with the hangout policy of the 'hood," he said. "And that's a problem a lot of kids have. They feel they owe something to the corner. You owe something to yourself."

But many people feel that stars who come from poor and working-class communities do owe something to the neighborhoods that spawned them.

Joseph Simmons, 30, stayed near his old Queens neighborhood, and he says it was not to be a role model. But he knows he is one, not only to younger rappers, but also to the children of Hollis, the working-class neighborhood where he grew up, and his group, Run-D.M.C., was born.

Mr. Simmons, 30, recently moved with his wife and four children to Jamaica Estates, an upper-middle-class community less than a mile from Hollis. "I can drive down the street, pass a little boy and he says, 'There goes Run, and he's from Hollis, and he's still here.' They can feel they can achieve the same goals. It doesn't seem out of reach."

Mr. Simmons, an ordained minister, is on Hollis Avenue most days, driving his Mercedes-Benz to the hardware store, taking his children to school, joining friends for a game of basketball.

The neighborhood was, and is, his inspiration. "What you saw in Run-D.M.C. was what Hollis brought out," said Mr. Simmons, whose group became the first internationally known rap superstars. "The hats, the sneakers: the image was hard. That's what Hollis made."

Some may question the merits of teen-agers looking up to rap idols, trying to attain something as elusive as stardom. But, the rapper Craig Mack said, "I'd rather hear somebody say they want to be a rapper than a drug dealer."

Last year, Mr. Mack, 25, had one of the biggest hits of the year, "Flava in Ya Ear." But a hit record does not necessarily mean instant wealth. For now, he lives with his wife and 1-year-old son in a

comfortable, modest town house a few miles from his childhood home in Brentwood, L.I.

There are some rappers who want to move farther. "I used to feel like staying in the 'hood was keeping it real," said the Notorious B.I.G., perhaps the biggest rap star of the moment. "But now it's not the thing to do. There's a lot of jealousy and envy. So it's time to go."

Raised in Bedford-Stuyvesant, B.I.G. (also known as Chris Wallace) used to sell crack near his doorstep and served time on Rikers Island and in North Carolina. He used the fear and paranoia he felt as a street hustler to fuel the lyrics that turned his debut album platinum.

Recently, he bought his mother a home and moved with his wife, the singer Faith, into a Fort Greene duplex, near where he grew up. But he dreams of moving much farther, to "a place with a guard, a gate."

"To me, if you stay in the same spot as you were in when you were doing nothing and now you're doing something, that's not progression," said Mr. Wallace, 22. "Being real is taking care of your family, your mother, your children, doing things with your money. When you think about getting wealthy, you think of mansions. Ain't no mansions in Brooklyn. You don't want to deal with the subways and the gunshots. You want to be comfortable and safe."

Heather Gardner, the rapper Heather B., feels a cocoon of warmth in her hometown, Jersey City, where she still lives.

"I never really know what I miss about it till I'm gone," said Ms. Gardner, 24. "When you're in other places, you always have to ask where the mall is, where's this, where's that. There's a certain security about being home. You just know where you're going. Always."

Ms. Gardner, who currently has a top 25 rap single, moved downtown when she couldn't find an apartment in her old neighborhood. But she opened a nail and hair salon five minutes from where she grew up. Several days a week she takes the short drive to that worn section.

She bumps into her cousin as she walks down the street. Her name is still splashed in ink on a generator next to Crown Fried Chicken, where she wrote it during her days at Lincoln High.

She lived in Manhattan once, as part of the inaugural cast of the MTV program "The Real World," but Ms. Gardner held on to her apartment on the other side of the Holland Tunnel. "I was like, I don't belong around here," she said. "I was like, I'm going right back to where I came from. Orange juice don't cost \$4 around my way."

But living in the old neighborhood sometimes means dealing with its pain.

The Wu-Tang Clan, whose members grew up in Park Hill and most of whom still live there, were friends of Ernest Sayon, a 22-year-old man who suffocated in police custody last year. His death sparked protests in the community, and members of the group say that they miss Mr. Sayon still.

"Everything from now on we're dedicating to Ernest," said Method Man, 24, one of the group's members.

The group has been the host on its own MTV special, and traveled to Japan. Its debut album, "Enter the Wu-Tang," went platinum.

Yet they are bound to Park Hill, a Staten Island neighborhood where the red brick housing project towers over weather-beaten storefronts, and a mural names the neighborhood's young dead. The group's nine members no longer live in the projects, but most still call the community home. They opened a business, the Wu Wear store, nearby.

"The only way I would really leave this right here is if I feel there's no hope of me getting through with what I'm saying through my rhymes," said Mr. Hunter, who says the group's hard-core lyrics bear a warning to the young. "If I wasn't here, they'd say, 'You just saying that.' But I'm taking the step to live it."

Photos: Method Man of Wu Tang Clan talking with children at the rap group's clothing store, Wu Wear, in Staten Island. The group's members grew up in the Park Hill housing projects, and most still call that neighborhood home. (pg. 43); The rapper Special Ed at Flatbush and Church Avenues, in his old Brooklyn neighborhood.; The rap artist Heather B. in her old neighborhood in Jersey City, where she still lives. (pg. 46) (Photographs by Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times) Chart: "Rappers Who Stay Say Their Strength Is From the Streets" From "Sucker M.C.'s" By Joseph Simmons of Run-D.M.C. (co-writer) AGE: 30 OLD NEIGHBORHOOD: Hollis, Queens I'm D.M.C. in the place to be, I go to St. John's University, And since kindergarten I acquired the knowledge, And after 12th grade I went straight to college, I'm light-skinned, I live in Queens, And I love eating chicken and collard greens, I dress to kill I love to style, I'm the M.C. you know who's versatile. From "Respect" By the Notorious B.I.G. (Chris Wallace) AGE: 22 OLD NEIGHBORHOOD: Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Hearing the coach scream Ain't my lifetime dream I mean I wanna blowup Stack my doe up So school I didn't show up. . . My moms said that I should grow up And check myself Before I wreck myself Disrespect myself Put the drugs on the shelf naww I couldn't see it Scar face king of N.Y. I wanna be it. From "The Bush" By Special Ed (Edward Archer) AGE: 22 OLD NEIGHBORHOOD: Flatbush, Brooklyn If you come to the Bush, Keep a low pro cause you might catch a knot or a shot, or a blow to the face in this place if you base you'll be broken coming off the train you gotta pay another token.