The legendary rapper opens up about new film 'Straight Outta Compton,' his complicated relationship with N.W.A, and why "nothing has changed" when it comes to police brutality.

Once upon a time a crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube burst onto the rap scene, pissing off politicians and police officers with his N.W.A crew by speaking truth to the street injustice he witnessed on a daily basis in his Compton, California, 'hood.

Back then N.W.A raised a middle finger to the suits, authorities, enemies, and critics who didn't like what they had to say or how they said it, buoyed by the album sales, fans, and groupies that told them they were onto something with tracks like "Straight Outta Compton," "Gangsta Gangsta," and "Fuck Tha Police."

Nowadays, Ice Cube is a producer of Universal's N.W.A biopic *Straight Outta Compton* , and the father of one of its stars (24-year-old O'Shea Jackson Jr., who plays his own dad). He's also softened his stance on critics.
Kinda
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"For those that came around, welcome to 2016," Ice Cube smiled to a roomful of journalists on a recent afternoon in Beverly Hills. "We've been looking for you since '89. I can expect some people will love the film and hate the group still. And that's fine, because it's all about being real. We want people to be real even when criticizing… and if you don't like the movie, you can kill yourself."

It's safe to say the younger, hungrier, angrier Cube depicted in *Straight Outta Compton* would have far harsher words for his detractors. But life has changed drastically for Ice Cube over three decades of turbulent highs and lows and beefs and breakups, in a career that's seen the gifted lyricist evolve from West Coast gangsta rapper to the N.W.A defector and chart-topping solo MC who once proclaimed himself
AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted

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The rapper born O'Shea Jackson is now also Ice Cube: 46-year-old family man, Hollywood actor, writer, and producer whose films have grossed over $1.3 billion to date. A whole generation of kids know him best as the irritable dad from the*Are We There Yet?* movies (not to mention *Boyz n the Hood*, the *Friday* films, two *Barbershops*, *Ride Along*, and *21* / *22 Jump Street*), thanks to a carefully cultivated career crossover Cube started engineering for himself soon after striking out on his own.

What's more, the now-adult children of the '90s who grew up bobbing their heads and pumping their fists to N.W.A's confrontational bangers haven't seen Cube or his Beats-pushing billionaire squadmate Dr. Dre get heated over anything in decades—let alone face off against cops, incite crowds to civil disobedience, trifle with groupies, dabble with gangbangers, or beef with rival crews with the kind of hostility that used to lead to savage beatdowns, or worse.

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But Ice Cube's worlds have never collided as thoroughly as they do in his latest film, *Straight Outta Compton*. A warts-and-all chronicle of the rise and fall of N.W.A (well, minus a few glaring omissions), the 1990s-set biopic is his most personal artistic expression since handing former BFFs Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, MC Ren, and DJ Yella their own asses on wax in 1991 after his infamous break from the group with the celebrated diss track "No Vaseline."

An N.W.A movie had been pitched to Cube for years before it took shape with his *Friday*

director and close friend, F. Gary Gray, behind the camera, "but they wanted it to depict more of a party atmosphere instead of what really happened, what really went down," Cube told The Daily Beast in an exclusive interview last weekend in Beverly Hills.

We're sitting in a posh suite at the Four Seasons, 20 miles and a lifetime away from the South Central neighborhood where Cube grew up writing aggressive rhymes inspired by the struggle and strife he saw around him. He famously penned those lines on the long bus rides to Taft High in the San Fernando Valley, in the 818, where he would later raise four kids including son / *Compton* star O'Shea Jr.

A glossy version of N.W.A's gritty streets-to-riches saga didn't interest Cube at the time, he said. But when a script found its way to him in 2009, the pieces started falling into place—director Gray, Universal and studio head Donna Langley, and fellow producer Dre. N.W.A members Yella and Ren came aboard as consultants. Tomica Woods-Wright, the wife Eazy-E left Ruthless Records to when he died in 1995, was a key component who came on as a producer, bringing licensing rights to N.W.A's seminal hip-hop tracks with her.

"Universal was like, 'We should do a real *serious* movie about N.W.A.' and that turned me on because I knew that was the kind of movie I wanted to make," said Cube. "I didn't want to make a typical biopic. They wanted to do a serious movie and not a movie that was like a money grab, you know? Like, *this is gangsta rap*…"

Rap historians have long rhapsodized over the meteoric rise of N.W.A—five young African-American men who exploded after the homegrown release of Eazy-E's 1987 single "Boyz-n-the-Hood." Cube was just 18 when he penned the song before collaborating with DJ-turned-producing prodigy Dre on much of N.W.A's debut album, *Straight Outta Compton*.

A whirlwind national tour followed, but so did arguments over credit, contracts, and compensation with Eazy and manager Jerry Heller. Ice Cube made his acrimonious split from the group and flew to New York to record his debut solo album *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted* before his 21st birthday.

Much of the group's melodramatic history is recounted in *Straight Outta Compton*, along with infectious restagings of their greatest moments—like the near-accidental recording of "Boyz-n-the-Hood." Like most Hollywood biopics, *Straight Outta Compton* takes artistic license in the name of dramatic folk hero mythmaking, and critics have fairly pointed out that the Cube and Dre-produced film conveniently skips over the group's troubling history of misogyny, homophobia, and Dre's notorious violent assault of MTV VJ Dee Barnes.

Gray might call those details extraneous "side stories." Cube frames *Straight Outta Compton* as an artistic expression of the big picture themes that made N.W.A who they were. For the young Cube depicted in the movie, that meant a character arc that emphasized the outside forces that drove wedges between the crew.

"I wanted to show that business broke us up, and it wasn't just ego and it wasn't people being greedy," Cube said. "It was just that you wanted what you deserved. [I wanted] to show people that the music business is *business*, and if you don't handle it, it can go south and go bad for you. It was a behind-the-veil look at what we were dealing with internally and what broke us up, ultimately."

Universal Pictures

Not that Cube has any regrets over his decision—a quarter of a century ago—to leave N.W.A to launch the solo career that gave him his own clique and his own label, Lench Mob Records. "I mean, I'm happy leaving the group," he said. "I don't have any regrets as a solo artist at all. So it's not sad, it's just reliving history and trying to tell it as closely to how it happened as possible."

"The sad part was shooting things I didn't know nothing about," he said, pausing. "I was never privy to that Eazy conversation when he found out that he was HIV positive. I was discovering things about N.W.A as I was making this movie because I was on my side of town going through what I was going through, and I didn't necessarily know what they were going through until I started researching and rehearsing."

What *was* tough on Cube was watching the film's young cast recreate some of N.W.A's scarier moments, particularly watching his own son getting roughed up by the police in scenarios he still vividly remembers. A scene in which Cube, Eazy, Ren, and Yella console a distraught Dre

over the sudden death of his younger brother was also rough, says Cube. So was watching actor Jason Mitchell, who turns in a standout performance as the young Eazy, getting violently ambushed in Suge Knight's office over Dre's contract. As the young cast recreated Dre and Cube's hospital visit to a comatose Eazy, Cube and his fellow producers got emotional: "We had to walk out a few times," he admitted.

The makers of *Straight Outta Compton* didn't bother consulting the real-life players who made history with Cube and Co. when it came to their "villains"—namely, manager Heller and bodyguard-turned-Death Row Records founder Knight. "Heller was always a champion for the group," Cube conceded to journalists earlier in the day. "When it was N.W.A vs. the world, Jerry Heller would fight. Now, dealing with us individually was another story…"

The man Cube once described as a slave master and "Jew" guilty of exploiting his ex-bandmates and "getting money out of [N.W.A's] ass like a muthafucking Ready Teller" is portrayed by a pot-bellied Paul Giamatti onscreen with what Cube argues is a balanced hand. "We wanted to show his humanity," he said. "We didn't want to shortchange him—even though he's our villain."

When I tell Cube that Heller's vowed to see *Straight Outta Compton* in theaters—with his lawyer in tow—a warm laugh escapes. "That's cool." He's got more complicated empathy for the film's *other* villain, Suge Knight, whose own controversial history is intertwined with that of N.W.A thanks to his relationship with Dre.

"He stepped out of the frying pan into the fire, a little bit," Cube said of Dre and his decision to partner with Knight. "It's all part of our life. I knew that it was movie-worthy. There are so many things that happened to all of us."

Played by an imposing lookalike actor named R. Marcos Taylor, Knight lumbers through the film with an air of menace and opportunism—but also protectiveness for Dre, who he later enticed to leave Ruthless for Death Row—often flanked by gangbangers flying the red colors of the Bloods.

"I think Suge Knight has a few, you know, *noble* scenes where he's trying to get what's right for D.O.C. and telling Dre that his paperwork might not be right," Cube told me. "To me, he did a lot to help Dre get out of the situation he was in."

"To me, Suge just lost focus a little bit and started to want that celebrity lifestyle for himself," Cube continued. "It just turned into this whole persona, and a lot of sidebar shit that didn't have nothing to do with making records. But I think he's just a guy who got a little caught up in the fame and felt entitled. It happens. It happens to the best, most clean-cut guys. So I don't think we demonized Suge. We just showed what was really out there and some of the things that really happened."

Knight, one of the most feared figures in hip-hop , has been behind bars since February for the fatal hit-and-run
that killed Terry Carter and injured Cle Sloan, a consultant on
Straight Outta Compton
. He'd reportedly showed up to Compton's Tam's Burgers following a promo video shoot for the film that's glimpsed in the end credits, although Cube denies any knowledge of why Knight was there at all.

"You get some guys that are a little sadistic, you get guys who are maybe a little racist, and now you have *humiliation*, which brings people to frustration, and these incidents start to heat up," Cube said of cops.

"I really don't know. I can't really say why he showed up," said Cube, who says Knight was not consulted about his depiction in the film. "I don't think he wanted to have anything to do with the film. I don't even know if he wanted the film to be made."

The *Compton* filmmakers would much rather focus on the role violence plays onscreen—not between gang-affiliated colleagues in local burger joints but at the hands of police officers circa 1990. Onscreen, the members of N.W.A take intermittent breaks from recording rap history, chasing women, and squabbling over contracts to watch news reports of the Rodney King beating in 1991, their marble-mansioned frustrations echoing the seething hurt and anger that boiled over the following year during the L.A. Riots.

"I've been following pretty much everything," Cube said, with a nod to Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Ferguson, and the recent shooting of unarmed Cincinnati man Sam Dubose that

shocked the nation just weeks before. “We thought it was important to show why we made the kind of music we did, that it was just as important as showing us on stage and having fun. *Why* did we make this music?”

A scene early on in *Straight Outta Compton* shows a young Cube being brutally searched with no cause by cops outside his house as his horrified parents look on, threatened into silent compliance by hostile officers. Another scene depicts the members of N.W.A violently forced to the ground outside their Torrance, CA recording studio as a group of officers, including a hostile African-American cop, harasses them for looking like gangbangers.

“The neighborhoods that we come from really forged N.W.A,” Cube said. “It made us into the group that we were and into the individuals that we are. I thought it was important to show that there were incidents of not only brutality, but disrespect and humiliation, and that fuels anger in everybody. We wanted to show that we were being *humiliated*, and it wasn’t just us being checked out or the police being cautious. It was like,
let’s add an extra layer of humiliation onto this situation
. And that’s the problem.”

Earlier in the day, Cube tempered his uber-serious talk of *Compton*’s unsubtle commentary on police brutality by joking to a press scrum: “If somebody breaks into my house I’m calling the goddamn police. I’m not calling my homies Ren, Yella, or Dre.”

But as he talked with The Daily Beast, Cube laid into his stance on law enforcement and why the film takes such pains to make its point. “Police in our society are trained to *win* at all costs. They’re not trained to uphold the law, to know your rights, to protect,” he said, scoffing at the thought. “Their thing is to
win
—win the argument, win the struggle, win the scuffle. Win. And if you have to violate somebody’s rights, so be it. Win on the street—we’ll deal with it afterwards.”

“You add that, you get some guys that are a little sadistic, you get guys who are maybe a little racist, and now you have *humiliation*, which brings people to frustration, and these incidents start to heat up,” he continued. “Cops feel like, ‘We’ve got to win at all costs,’ so now they get physical and they get abusive, and they throw all of their force at you. The same thing happened before I was born; there was a riot in ’65 in Watts with the police. It happened when we were doing records, and it’s still happening today. It was important to show that nothing has

changed.”