



FIGURE 1. Album cover from Blackie's *Face the Darkness* (2020).

“All That He Seen Burnt a Hole in His Brain”

A Playlist

RYAN WALLER

The title of this playlist comes from the chorus of Armand Hammer’s “Rehearse with Ornette,” wherein Billy Woods repeats, “All that he seen burnt a hole in his brain/only came back to tell ‘em bout them fucking flames.” This idea of a mind swallowed in shock, bellowing its truth out, strikes me as a deeply disturbing image and a generative point of entry into the psychic terror of black being in the afterlife of slavery. Thus the tracks in this playlist explore the Afro-Gothic mindset, a conceptual framework presented by people like M. Lamar and Leila Taylor, that is visceral and impressionistic, and thus particularly hard to define.¹ To understand what emerged as a mood or tone that encapsulates black life in the long shadow of colonialism, I turn to sound—specifically the songs that both lyrically and sonically express themes of faith and grief as part of the soundtrack to everyday black life. A playlist is a personal curation, and hip-hop, the music that plays in my head as I navigate urban spaces, both sounds and maps the spider web of ideas and worlds generated by the concept of the Afro-Gothic.

Black people have always expressed the pain of life through our songcraft, and this sorrow permeates the tracks on this playlist, providing a chorus of Afro-Gothic voices wrestling with a sense of alienation and feelings of loss and mourning that situates these songs within a much longer tradition of black art. Yet I think it’s worth engaging with the Afro-Gothic as a specific tendency toward the excavation of emotions related to black gloom and feelings of hopelessness instead of uplift. The confessional expression of ter-

ror playing in my own headphones and headspace is a distinct encounter with black life's intimate relationship with death. If black life in the West and elsewhere is a confrontation with the certainty of death and the matrices of oppression that hound us across generations and centuries, my proposition is that the complexity of hip-hop's fusion of fantastic abstract surrealism and bleak reportage—a sort of magical realist approach to street tales—is a philosophical response to these circumstances.

1. Scarface, "Diary of a Madman" (1991)

With the classic "Mind Playing Tricks on Me," the Geto Boys were some of the first in the genre to plumb a level of psychological depth that gave listeners a window into the emotional turmoil of young black men after the chaos of the '80s. Scarface, a member of the group, released his debut solo album, *Mr. Scarface Is Back*, in 1991, and he extends the themes of the Geto Boys' music through hyperviolent scenes of abject destruction, rampant misogyny, and horror movie-style murder. Following the cruelty of the song "Your Ass Got Took," with its horrifying imagery and upbeat funky production, the next track, "Diary of a Madman," immediately changes the pace of the album. The drums are more obscured, swallowed by a thumping 808 that drags the beat along rather than driving it. On top of the mind-warping production, Scarface relays a tale of gothic mental anguish through the narrator's frank discussion of the debilitating ache of depression triggered by the horrific actions he witnesses and perpetrates on a day-

to-day basis. The result is a series of macabre images, including a mysterious man in a black suit with a cane; the black book referenced in the song's title; flashbacks to a man, shot in the face, bleeding with his eyes open; and a stranger walking on a path ahead of him that looks just like him but is still unrecognizable. On this track, Scarface reminds us of the abject nature of black life in the shadow of death with his eerie words toward the end of the first verse: "Ain't no use in trying/We might as well face it, we were all born dying."

2. Lo-Key, "On That Devilshit" (1994)

Hip-hop artists on the Memphis scene in the 1990s were known for expressing life's hardships at the height of the crack cocaine epidemic through their horror-obsessed perspective. Lo-Key was one of the many artists to emerge from this network of horror aficionados who were telling terrifying stories of the Tennessee streets. A cousin of Tommy Wright III, one of the most popular and beloved veterans of the Memphis scene, Lo-Key's claim to legend was his 1994 EP *Test My Nutz*. The record is lo-fi, most likely recorded in Wright's kitchen, and like other Memphis classics of the 1990–95 period, the album benefits from the sound of a cassette crackle permeating through every track. "On That Devilshit," the most famous track from this EP, is emblematic of the Memphis sound, as Satanism was a popular lyrical theme at the time, and "On That Devilshit" uses it in an iconic way: the boys who steer wrong in the face of the temptation of the streets are clearly possessed by

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the devil. Bodily possession is one of the more popular tropes of the Gothic and expresses the internal suffering of someone who is spiritually, physically, and psychologically compromised. The gothic experience of a Satanic seduction is further heightened by the track's supernaturally smooth beat with an unnerving high-pitched vocal sample from Deniece Williams.

3. Lil Noid, "Death Row" (1995)

Paranoid Funk (1995), on its own, is just under twenty minutes. But in that time, Lil Noid, who was a teenager when the record was made, takes the listener on a sonic journey focused on his interior emotions. The division between horrorcore and the Afro-Gothic becomes clear for me here. While Lo-Key's "On That Devilshit" uses the tropes of horrorcore to express danger and regret, Lil Noid uses beautifully haunting beats to draw portraits of a young man's conflicted emotional state. Using the haunted house textures of Blackout's production to illuminate the darkness of a tortured state of mind, this style is best explored in "Death Row," the album's centerpiece. On what might be Blackout's most gothic, cinematic beat ever,

Lil Noid's youthful pain comes out in droves over the staccato, slightly dissonant piano chords and funereal synth horns. Lil Noid uses the song to relate a story of a young man who is arrested after killing a man and his father in a burglary. The song follows his arrest and court sentencing and the time spent awaiting his demise on death row. There is no salvation or plot twist in this story, no grand resolution beyond his inevitable execution as he watches his mother cry for him. The specter of death follows every line of this song, as a young black man punished for his crime wrestles and eventually comes to terms with his execution at the hands of the state. Even at such a young age, Lil Noid clearly understood the darker edge of life and gives us a snapshot of the pain of awaiting his death.

4. DJ Screw and Point Blank, "My Mind Went Blank" (1995)

DJ Screw is universally beloved for his iconic mixes, slowing down and rearranging his collaborators and favorite musicians to create marvels of curatorial magic. He was a member of the Screwed Up Click, a massive collective of rappers and producers who

got together frequently to drink lean, smoke, free-style, and make albums. "My Mind Went Blank" is one of the finest mixes he ever made, as it illustrates the beauty of Screw's production but also the imagery and intensity of Point Blank's performance. Although the track contains his usual boastful style, the chorus's double-tracked vocals and plaintive ad-libs feel like someone is screaming out for help. The slowed nature of the beat transforms the original into a mournful, paranoid slow burner that makes you want to dissolve until your mind, dulled by paranoia, goes blank as well. Point Blank's music often uses Satanism as a thematic tool for shock value, and laid against such a nocturnal instrumental backing, his dark musings invoke a feeling of revolt against the black Christian sensibilities of civility that echoed so much of hip-hop culture at the time. The Satanist streak in the genre that Point Blank helped pioneer represents a rejection of humanity in favor of a more monstrous being, befitting of black abject existence.

5. Juvenile, "Who's Tha M.F." (1997)

Juvenile's album *Solja Rags* (2017) retains a lo-fi, eerie intimacy. It feels raw and intense, like we are in the room with the artist. So at the same time Juvenile regales the audience with tales of crime and sex, he also takes us to the heart of New Orleans and the Magnolia Projects, which remain a central landmark encapsulating the resilient spirit of its residents who create and celebrate in the face of death. The album really shines in its darker tracks, and its emotional centerpiece, "Who's Tha M.F.," is a somber,

storytelling-focused track. It begins with a bitter anecdote about a man down on his luck, struck by misfortune, as he's been betrayed by somebody he knew and trusted. Like a gothic antihero shaken by his own temptations, he wrestles with the decision to give in to his hatred and kill or move on. The song grows darker, reflecting on the psychological tension between black men in this economic situation ("Tired of havin'nothin', wearin' my brother's clothes/Many times I got drove by niggas in front of hoes/You know how it be dog you ain't been ballin' all your life/You was around that bitch too, dirty, stealin' bikes"). In the second verse, Juvenile tells the tale of robbing a rival drug dealer, and in the dramatic posturing of a young man who has done nothing but bring pain into the world, the story of crime and heartbreak is presented from a nuanced, tortured angle.

6. Hot Boys, "Get It How U Live" (1997)

The Hot Boys debut album, *Get It How U Live!!* (1997) heralded the beginning of a new era for Cash Money Records and represents one of the more melancholic and solemn works from the label's catalog.² Some of Mannie Fresh's funkier beats are on this project, and most of the songs on the album deal with the dark intensity of life in '90s New Orleans in a frank, reflective way. Each verse on the title track uses a second-person perspective, warning listeners about the danger of growing up in the shadow of death. Lil Wayne, then only fourteen years old, leads the song off with his first great verse. He uncovers the other side of being a successful gangsta, asking if the lis-

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tener is ready to accept that descent into darkness, to embrace walking next to death at all times. The verse ends with a short narrative where “you” get killed over a simple issue of payment, showing exactly how futile all these struggles can be in the face of the uncaring world. All you can do in this cruel world, this “dirty world,” as he puts it on another song by that name, is to get it how you live, struggle for what’s yours, and hope you make it home just in time to do it all again the next day.

7. Wu-Tang Clan, “Cash Still Rules/ Scary Hours (Still Don’t Nothing Move but the Money)” (1997)

Among the highlights of Wu-Tang’s career, which includes the raw intensity of their group debut and

the run of classic solo albums released by its affiliate members from 1994 to 1996, their second studio album, *Wu-Tang Forever* (1997), stands out.³ Much has been made of the dark nature of New York City in the 1990s, and representing Staten Island, the Wu-Tang camp and their music perfectly encapsulate the grimy gothic nature of the Rudy Giuliani era. While RZA’s side project the Gravediggaz and the horrorcore aesthetic of their 1994 album *6 Feet Deep* addresses similar themes, this selection from *Wu-Tang Forever* exemplifies the distinct quality of the Afro-Gothic soundworld that, instead of just invoking explicit horror movie tropes, applies signature Wu-Tang production techniques to commonplace imagery to illuminate the mundane horror of street violence. *Wu-Tang Forever*, for all its glitz and glamor, contains some of the group’s most esoteric, abstract, and atmospherically bleak lyricism in their entire discography. “Cash Still Rules,” with its eerie droning vocal samples thundering behind a piano, conjures a darkness that still inspires chills. Just as the haunting notes of an organ, a squeaky door opening slowly, and creaking wood floors contribute to an all too familiar sonic trope of a haunted house, so *Wu-Tang Forever* establishes a canonical soundtrack for Staten Island Gothic. In this song, a follow-up to their 1993 hit “C.R.E.A.M.,” Ghostface drops one of his most legendary verses. It’s here that the lyrics drift deeper into gothic territory by describing the bloodcurdling scene of a man getting shot in the head and bleeding out in the street. The head wound becomes the gory split of a fearful mental state.

8. Mozzy, “Off the Dribble” (2015)

Sacramento native Mozzy’s biography is like an archive of Bay Area black life in the post–civil rights era: his grandmother is an OG member of the Black Panthers, and he, decades later, became a member of the Oak Park Bloods. “Off the Dribble,” from his 2015 mixtape *Yellow Tape Activities* (his second of four mixtapes released that year), creates a gothic atmosphere by weighing the emotional and physical toll of living “in the life.” The beat, made by his regular collaborator June Onna Beat, languishes alongside a downcast piano sample and is garnished with a spectral vocal sample. Mozzy’s appeal lies in his creative lyricism and stunning ability to tell a story in which the usual hip-hop scenes like police searches, the act of hiding guns, and release from jail take a more melancholic turn. On this track he waxes poetic about his life in the hood, noting that taking care of street beef isn’t an issue for him (“that’s off the dribble”), and focuses on the harsher facts of street life, reminding the listener “ain’t no hospital when them seven points in ‘em.” However, Mozzy’s lyrics on *Yellow Tape Activities* are less focused on the nature of street warfare than was the case with his first major mixtape, *Bladadah*, from earlier that year. Rather than on-the-streets boasting, this release explores the fallout of these conflicts—in a courthouse, in the hospital, and in an emptied house.

9. Ka, “Ours” (2016)

Ka’s fourth studio album, 2016’s *Honor Killed the Samurai* has an almost classical gait, a dramatic scope,

and impressionistic production. The artist depicts the bleak, gothic world of Brownsville, Brooklyn, using samples primarily sourced from Japanese *jidaigeki* (set in the Edo period) and *chanbara* (samurai sword fighting) films. The album is about the life of a samurai often facing death because he is expected to place his life on the line for the daimyo he serves. The samurai lives by complex codes of honor that demand incredible sacrifice. The first verse of “Ours” opens with these chilling bars: “It took sacrifice, much loss before the gain/paid a drastic price, misfortune and disdain/framed a shattered life, the forfeits and the pain/all the saddest sights, the coffins and the stains/on days wish I could save the children that we was/we didn’t spare they eyes from all the killings and the drugs/steppin’ and protectin’ them from feelin’ any slugs/many ways mediate, the savior healin’ any grudge.” Combining lyrics about the everyday claustrophobia of ghetto life and the *jidaigeki* and *chanbara* genres, Ka creates a connection between the samurai and black men living in a similarly perilous fashion and, as a result, emphasizes the cyclical nature of pain and horror.

10. Armand Hammer, “Bitter Cassava” (2020)

Shrines (2020) is an arresting album, suffused with Afro-Gothic imagery throughout. That haunting begins with Billy Woods’s opening salvo on the first track, “Bitter Cassava”: “I’m a black hole, I’m a light bender/water cold, I’m a night swimmer/One baobab in the desert, fire-/wood’s for the peasant, pope, the king’s pheasant/roast over open coals, no kitchen/piles of cracked chicken bones, the neighbor’s goat missing/okra out

“AIN’T NO USE IN TRYING/ WE MIGHT AS WELL FACE IT, WE WERE ALL BORN DYING”

the throat where the blade kissed him/entrails split, there was never a vision/There was never nothin’ in em/The sky was indifferent, the ground hold bitter cassava/They lie ‘bout the loaves and the fishes/But not that road to perdition.” In this small section of a verse, billy woods draws on black symbols (dark water, black holes, the baobab tree) and gruesome imagery (piles of chicken bones, a stolen goat, a slit throat, entrails split in half). Yet the most potent gothic image may be the reference to bitter cassava, a root vegetable and staple throughout the African diaspora including in my own Jamaican culture, because if improperly prepared the bitter cassava is poisonous. The song suggests that precarity in many forms, alimentary or spiritual, haunt our diasporic communities.

11. Armand Hammer, “Pommelhorse” (2020)

On “Pommelhorse” Armand Hammer (Elucid and billy woods) uncover Gothic imagery through “scream therapy” that ties embodied memories, like sleeping in the streets while wearing boots, to the memory of Seneca Village, the nineteenth-century free black village that is now Central Park. Elucid raps about the specter of black death in cities like New York—

“Every nerve at attention, no reception, soul in suspension/I’m grounded but sunked into African burial ground from here to Seneca Village/You can’t dig a hole fast enough, deep enough, wide as fuck”—and billy woods follows with a verse that opens on black folk’s environmental precarity—“With that mortgage, tornado insurance/That house will be my old lady’s coffin/Ill winds, more often snatch negroes off porches.” Moving from this sense of unsafety in either setting, the song returns to the fantasy of a harmonious relationship between black people and the environment in its final moments when a man being interviewed says, “My brother wanted to build a zoo. He wanted to build a utopia because when he looked around all he seen was destruction in our neighborhood.” Yet without enough money to sustain this dream or a tiger, the man and the song recount the “lessons of achieving dreams and reaching fantastical heights” that dissolve into the struggle for survival.

12. Blackie, “While They Try to Kill Each Other” (2020)

Blackie is a unique musician who straddles genres including hip-hop, noise, and punk. On 2020’s *Face the Darkness*, he returned after several years of silence with an uproarious and noisy album that suited the first year of COVID (fig. 1). The lyrics on the album’s opening track, “While They Try to Kill Each Other,” are about the power structures that pit our people against each other while reaping the profits of our destruction. Sonically, the song features a plodding, dark bass that is reminiscent of bands such as Bau-

haus or Fields of the Nephilim, while the dour down-tempo tone echoes industrial artists like Ministry. Together the song's alignment of white supremacy and cannibalism occurs at commercial scale. In other words, Blackie approaches the afterlife of slavery as an industrial plan that hinges on black people, their work, and their eventual destruction. Although he situates our struggles in a long historical framework, these gothic industrial poetic proclamations appear as a prescient assessment of the pandemic's effect on black communities.

13. Armand Hammer, "Sir Benni Miles" (2021)

Produced entirely by hip-hop legend the Alchemist, *Haram* (2021) catapulted Armand Hammer into unprecedented visibility. Alchemist's textural, gritty production fit billy woods and Elucid's rhymes, and in turn they use his sonic palette to explore the depths of their minds. In the intro to the album, "Sir Benni Miles," billy woods paints a vivid picture of black life. The song begins with the sound of a man interrupting a crowd of dancing people to make what sounds like an ominous announcement, and billy woods's verse is a calm response; he raps, "ain't no saving us, ain't no slaving us/you gon need a bigger boat, you gon need a smaller ocean/but here's some more rope." His words are a haunting invocation of the persistence of black life in the aftermath of the genocidal slave trade. Yet as his vocals stretch on, monotone and authoritative, they eventually become warped as if he's run out of breath. On the last two lines his clear voice is replaced by a hollow echoing effect that sounds

like a possession. Building time and space in the song through the sound of the party and delayed dancing and also the cavernous void from which the artist's vocals resonate, the atmospheric track uses space and time to communicate a haunting presence. ■

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Notes

1 Lamar, "Lordship and Bondage"; Taylor, *Darkly*.

2 One might notice I focused primarily on southern rappers in this playlist. This was intentional on my end. Southern Gothic is an established literary and artistic aesthetic, and I felt that the darkness in southern hip-hop is not properly attended to. By de-centering New York rap, I provide an alternative perspective on hip-hop's historical impact. Hip-hop's regional scenes have always been culturally rich, and by mining that darkness, I intend to widen the understanding of Afro-Gothic's expression in hip-hop.

3 Editorial note: The inclusion of this track is a tribute to the late great Greg Tate, who in early conversations about this special issue on the Afro-Gothic insisted that some mention be made of "that Staten Island Gothic!!!" (Yes, he said it with the exclamation marks.) RIP, GT.

Works Cited

- Lamar, M. "Lordship and Bondage: The Birth of the Negro Superman." *Theater* 49, no. 2 (2019): 45–47.
- Taylor, Leila. *Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul*. London: Repeater Books, 2019.