

“White Boy Rick” and Crime in Detroit

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The years 1978 to 1990 on the streets of Detroit represent one of the most violent eras of crime in American history. Practically all of the bloodshed in that period could be attributed to the local drug trade. Experts and local criminologists place the death toll at well over 1,000 gangland-related homicides. Throughout those dozen years, both the product and the consumer changed drastically, but the landscape itself stayed pretty much the same—as treacherous as humanly possible.

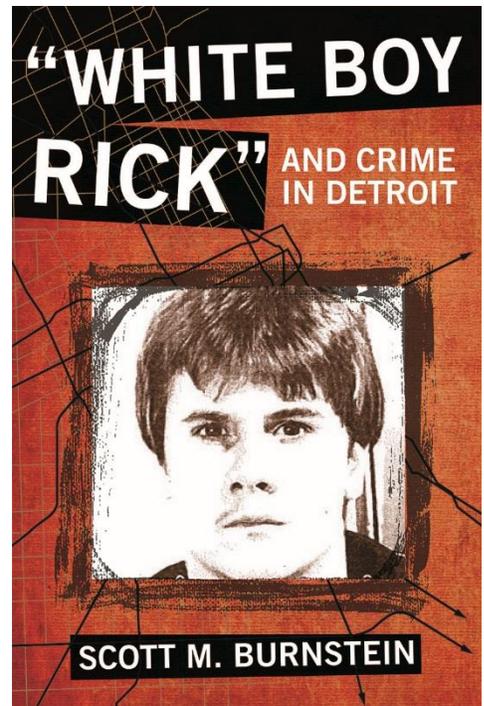
“The streets were decaying, people were fleeing the city in masses and the dope peddlers took over what was left,” said Robert De Fauw, former head of the Drug Enforcement Administration in Detroit. “First it was heroin and then it was cocaine. Things got pretty chaotic. Murder was rampant and life was cheap.”

One retired DEA agent likened the climate to military combat: “I served in Vietnam in the 1960s and that experience was the only thing I can equate to my experience working the narcotics trade in Detroit in the 1980s. In terms of how much you’re observing death in its most raw and visceral sense, they were almost identical. Whatever side you were on, whether you were a cop or a dealer, you were constantly surrounded by death. Violence and murder was so commonplace that after a while everybody became immune to it. Not that I didn’t feel for the victims, especially the innocent ones, but that it just became routine, kind of ho hum. Every second you turned around another bottom dropped. By the time I left Detroit, I was numb.”

Besides the carnage of the era, it was a time known for its decadence. And accordingly, the men who made their names in the era lived their lives lavishly with flamboyant showmanship and media-friendly panache and charisma. Eye-popping excesses were displayed all around town by these urban “crime czars,” flashed for everyone to see at all the city’s trendiest nightclubs, finest restaurants and front row at any number of local professional sporting events and music concerts.

“Some of those guys were walking around with chains around their neck that were worth as much as my entire year’s salary,” said one former Detroit police officer. “You’d see kids that you had once known as these little tykes on 10-speed bicycles bouncing around the neighborhood and all of sudden...they’re driving a \$50,000 Mercedes and flashing a cash roll that would choke a horse. That’s how fast you could get rich.”

The start of the 1970s saw the death of Detroit’s first genuine African American Godfather, Henry Marzette, and the emergence of more traditional black street gangs like the



“Black Killers” and the “Errol Flynns.” The “BKs” and “Flynns,” or “Flynn Nastys” as they became known, were into minor drug dealing and did engage in murder, but these things weren’t the gangs’ primary motivation and never came close to the level achieved by their successors.

While early gang life in Detroit’s black community was more of an outlet for juvenile angst, male bonding and random petty crime than a means of making truckloads of money, this new era on the streets brought outright bloodlust in the quest for dominance of the drug market and created demigods of aspiring kingpins. The gangs that formed in the latter 1970s and in the first half of the 1980s were considerably larger and more organized than their predecessors like the BKs or Flynns, and they would far exceed in money earned, body count and overall exposure any urban criminal faction or gang leader of the past.

“There was a significant shift that took place on the streets around here in the late ’70s and early ’80s,” recalls former drug lord-turned-author Rob Boyd. “Things moved from strictly gangbanging to pushing weight in the drug trade. All of a sudden everyone is scrambling for the same dollar and a spot to sling and it ain’t about gangbanging anymore. That’s when it became about business. Nobody could get rich from gangbanging. With powder, everybody could get fat and the market never went dry, so there was always more money that could be made. It was not about being brothers or being homeboys like it was before. It was about stacking as much paper as you can and showing it off.”

The renowned sociologist Dr. Carl Taylor, a Detroit native who wrote his dissertation on urban crime and gang activity in the Motor City, concurred with Boyd’s assessment:

“The entire paradigm changed. When things got organized and young black men realized they could reach for the American Dream on the street, which wasn’t just to get paid, but to get paid in full and they would be applauded for it by a lot of people, the game was immediately altered from that point forward. What spawned from that renaissance were highly efficient war tribes. These weren’t just thugs or hooligans anymore. These were true sophisticated criminals with a mind for free enterprise.”