

UNDER- DOGS: THE COUP'S FUNKY REVOLUTION

WORDS: JESSE ASHLOCK

PHOTO: JONATHAN SPRAGUE

"I got love for the underdog," Boots Riley declares on the Coup's 1998 release *Steal This Album*. It's a feeling the 33-year-old rapper has known since his earliest days as a thinking person, organizer and musician. If you've ever read a review of the veteran Oakland hip-hop combo, also featuring DJ Pam the Funkstress, it probably contained phrases like "Marxist rhetoric" and "fierce polemics" – fair enough for a group which, from its first album, has counted among its aims "killing the world banking and the international monetary fund." But while radical elán is essential to the group's mission and identity, the Coup shows another side all about fun, soul and yes, love. It's the combination which makes Riley such a potent spokesman – one of the few in hip-hop – for a world so many rappers seek to leave behind.

There's no such thing as ghetto fabulous in the Coup's world, only unassailable ghetto facts: living without health insurance, tangling with the repo man, working for minimum wage at Mickie D's, and of course, getting hassled by the police. More than anyone else in hip-hop, Riley understands modern racism as something systematically reinforced by the American class system, and his laconic, playful, preternaturally elastic flow lets him express his ideas so effectively and sympathetically that his fantasies about drowning CEOs or pissing on George Washington's grave don't just sound like reasonable ideas, they sound like a damn fine time. The key is that his incisive rhymes, sharply drawn vignettes and howlingly funny satirical skits rarely veer into dogmatism. Riley's not interested in telling you how to get your mind right; he's interested in offering a fresh angle on this story we're all living. "My political view is not that things are fucked up because you're not doing the right thing," he explains. "Things are fucked up because there is this evil ruling class doing this stuff to us – so let's go get 'em."

That philosophy is played out against, and complemented by, the band's backdrop of sprawling, infectious, East Bay funk. Though frequently rambunctious, the Coup's sound features neither the militant, avant-garde chaos of Public Enemy nor the ominous, thudding intimidation of gangsta rap. Two idioms to which their music is often compared. Instead they bring a mix of head-nodding, bass-heavy beats, soulful live instrumentation and full-flavor vintage samples mixed with wick-wack scratches courtesy of Pam, a palette all about energy and vitality and bringing folks together. The music's underlying accessibility is just as consistent with Riley's worldview as his lyrics, underscoring the fact that everything he's done artistically is an outgrowth of a lifelong interest in political organizing.

Riley's parents were both heavily involved in the civil rights movement when he was young, their work with the NAACP and other groups taking them from Chicago to Detroit and then to Oakland, where Riley's dad was involved with Students for a Democratic Society and the Progressive Labor Party. Though his parents were burned out on the movement by the time he reached his teens, Riley got involved with PLP on his own, and was soon working with the group on a national level, flying around the country and setting up youth clubs. By age 19, he was burned out too.

Seeking to put his ideas into music, he and some friends started a cultural organization called Mau Mau Rhythm Collective. Mau Mau crumbled within a few years, but not before fostering the birth of the Coup, which Riley started with coworker and fellow MC E-Roc, and later Pam, a local DJ he'd met at Tupac Shakur's 2Pacalypse record release party. "Capitalism is like a spider, the web is getting tighter," Riley announced on the Coup's first single, "Not Yet Free," featuring a sample from one of his musical heroes, Ice Cube. That song and the ensuing 1993 LP *Kill My Landlord* introduced a talent as uncompromising as the gangstas and as intelligent as the "positive" hip-hop of the Native Tongues collective.

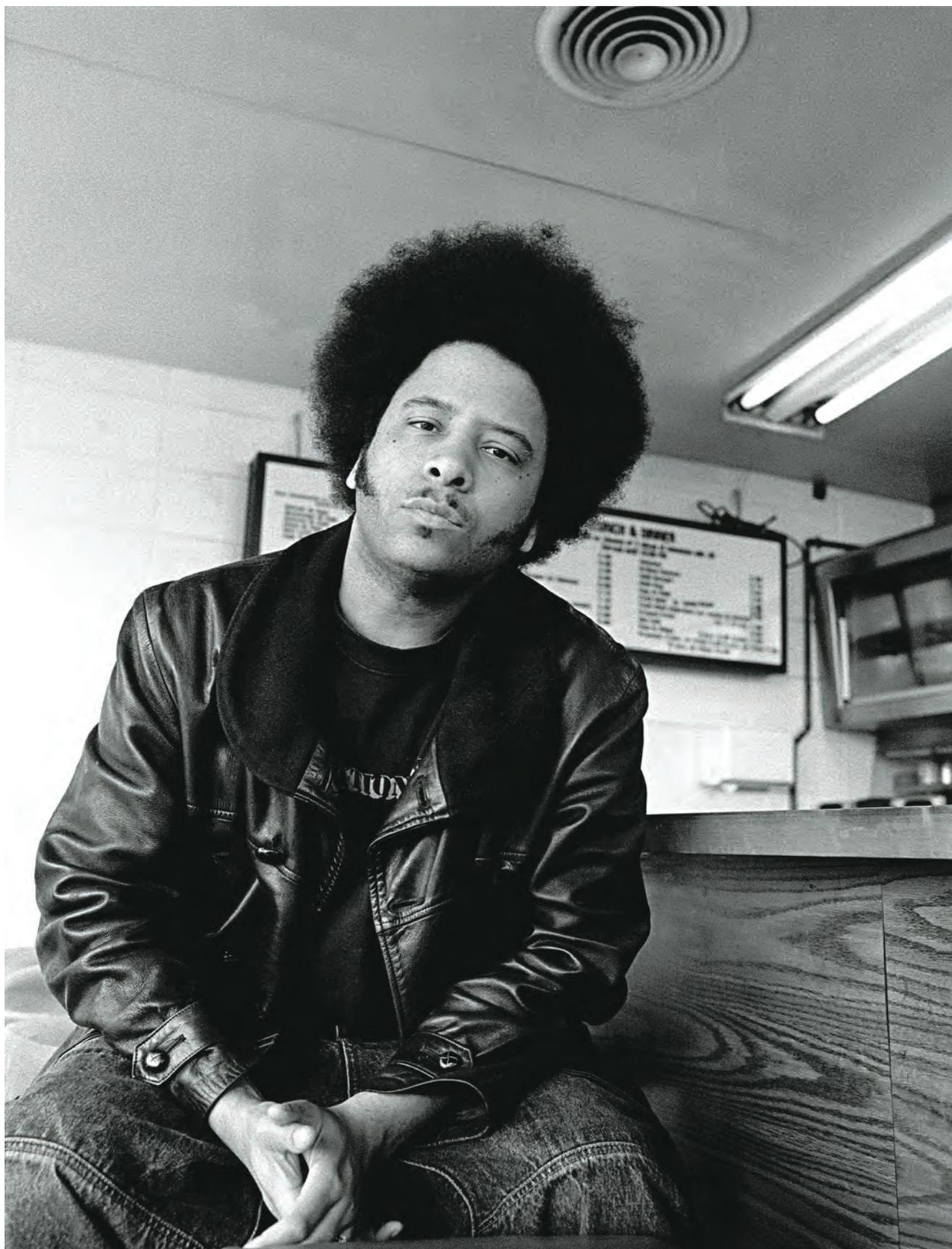
Naturally, the media dismissed them. Worse, *Landlord* and the explosive '94 follow-up *Genocide and Juice*, found almost no commercial outlets. Though urban radio stations were deluged with requests for *Genocide*'s first single, "Fat Cats, Bigga Fish," the comic tale of a small-time hustler who wanders into a party of stuffy bigwigs, most refused to play it because, as Riley recalls, "the way I rap made people listen more." Nearly all the group's promotion came through video, where they got censored to death; the defunct urban Video on Demand channel The Box refused to play the Coup at all, claiming their videos would "create unrest in the streets." But the biggest blow came when EMI bought out the Coup's label and promptly shelved *Genocide and Juice* (both albums were briefly reissued, but are out of print again; *Genocide* fetches up to \$100 on eBay).

"I was real depressed," Riley remembers. "I was 24, and I was like, 'I've wasted my whole life doing this music and I'm gonna quit.' So I quit rapping." He sought answers in his Oakland community, starting another organization, Young Comrades (named for the militant youth groups of apartheid-era South Africa), which worked through the mid-90s on local campaigns and neighborhood issues. But in time, the group fell victim to its own *weltanschauung*. "It was like "Here are the ideas, check out the ideas, don't you like them?" Realizing that disseminating information was still something he could do more artfully and effectively through music, Riley began working on a new album.

E-Roc had left the group, so Boots and Pam continued as a duo, enlisting support from friends like Del the Funkee Homosapien. 1998's *Steal This Album* was a richer experience, revealing Riley's growing sophistication and eclecticism as a producer who increasingly relied on layered live instrumentation to shape mood. Lyrically too, Riley upped the ante, offering nuanced observations about the material conditions of inner city poverty. Particularly revelatory was the sensually melancholic seven-minute revenge fantasy "Me and Jesus the Pimp in the '79 Grenada Last Night." The story of a man confronting the pimp father who'd killed his mother when he was a boy, it underscored Riley's skill at using narrative to offer broader social commentary ("I don't think that it's gon' end 'til we make revolution / But who gon' make the shit if we worship prostitution?").

Steal This Album didn't do much better than the previous two, eventually going out of print as well (it's since been reissued with bonus material as *Steal This Double Album*), but the Coup finally got some real publicity, good and bad, with their fourth album, *Party Music* – the one with the infamous cover featuring Boots and Pam detonating the World Trade Center. After the events of that fateful September Tuesday, the group's new label 75Ark said no, so *Party Music* wound up with a Molotov cocktail on its cover. Lost in the controversy was another great album, featuring a new smooth R&B streak alongside some of Riley's funkier and most impassioned rhetoric to date.





Some people did notice, with numerous noteworthy publications placing the album among the year's best, but *Party Music* failed to make a commercial splash. Moreover, while a very few hip-hop artists – like the Coup's "revolutionary but gangsta" accomplices Dead Prez – do bear the group's influence, Riley is still a long ways from having the kind of broadscale impact on the culture as a whole that might be expected of someone of his talent and intellect – unlike, say, Chuck D, the man so many see as his forebear. "I think a lot of hip-hop artists now shy away from the kind of politics Boots gets into," comments Erik Gilbert, who signed the Coup to 75Ark (but left to form a new label, Coup d'Etat, before the cover flap). "The role models are about money a lot of times, rightly and wrongly. I think a lot of people [who] come from poor backgrounds don't want to hear about politics and staying in the poor background, what's happening in the poor background. They want to get out of where they come from, so they dismiss it."

Riley's reach could still grow with help from his newest label, EpiTaph, which figures to be more sensitive to his politics and seems well situated to connect the Coup with audiences beyond the hip-hop domain.

On his fifth album, tentatively titled *Fuck You, Pay Me* and due later this year, Riley promises a grittier, rawer sound – "more Funkadelic than Parliament, more Dirty Mind than Purple Rain" – shaped with help from former members of Sly and the Family Stone (the first single, "Show Your Ass," is out this summer). More promising still, Riley is working on a boatload of other projects, including the funk-rap group Defiant and the live funk band Baby Daddy. He's also hatching plans for a label he says will be a "revolutionary Motown."

The flurry of activity comes not a moment too soon. One gets the feeling America needs a Boots Riley, now maybe more than ever. It needs someone uncompromising yet generous, someone demanding yet forgiving, someone steadfastly committed to making shit better and convinced that people have it in them to make that happen. "This shit is not all scary and shit," Riley insists. "We got a lot of problems, but I don't think of the world as scary, and I don't think of it as 'everything is doomed.' I think of it as hopeful. People have a power that's within them, and that's the kind of feeling that I get from my music."

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