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MAMA'S GUN, 20 YEARS LATER: THE INFLUENCE OF ERYKAH BADU

November 21, 2020 · Taylor Crumpton



Mama's Gun cover artwork

Before Erykah Badu, there was Erica Free. A 24-year-old jazz singer who sang over hip-hop tracks, Free witnessed the birth of hip-hop in Dallas and played a significant role in its development within the city limits and beyond. The oldheads refer to her as Apples or Rah Rah; old monikers of her days as an aspiring MC who sharpened her skills at local radio station [KNON 89.3 FM](#), the birthplace of hip-hop in Dallas and home to one of the longest-running hip-hop radio shows in the U.S.

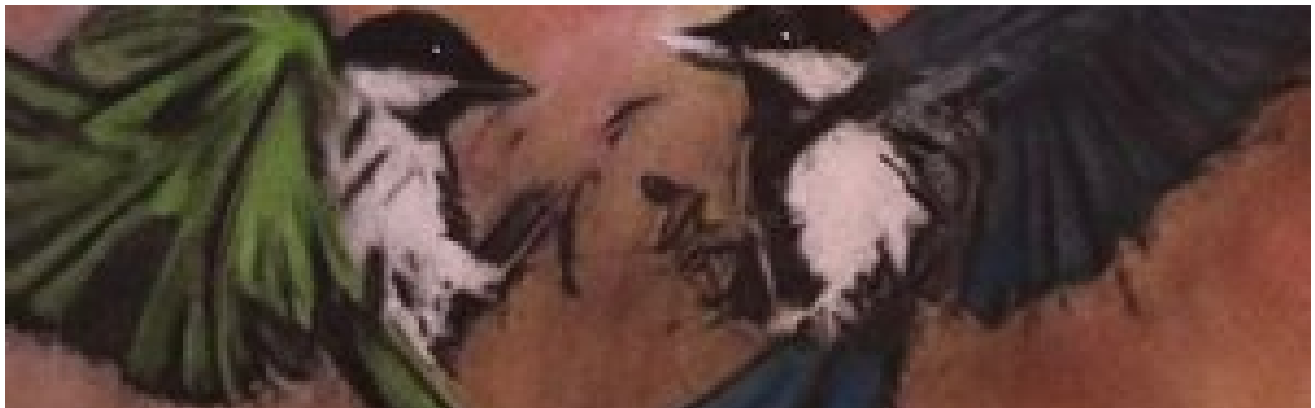
“Hip-hop is bigger than what people think in Dallas,” Free said in Jeff Schroer’s 2013 documentary *The Session*, which captures her love for her hometown music scene during the mid-90s. At the time of filming, she was a co-host of a local event called The Session, where DJs and MCs from across Dallas congregated to incubate a growing musical subculture.

The Session was the first hip-hop event of its kind in Dallas-Fort Worth. Inspired by MC-driven events in other cities across the nation, Big Ben and Cold Cris of Mad Flava created The Session because “there was nowhere to go in Dallas to hear hip-hop, there was no place where MCs could go and kick skills,” Ben said in the documentary.

Two years before her critically acclaimed debut studio album *Baduizm*, Free sang snippets of that album at The Session. Within the documentary, you hear the Neo-Soul legend in her purest form: surrounded by her peers, an underground family tethered by their love for hip-hop. A bond that eclipsed the boundaries of time, Cris remains heavily involved in Badu’s online venture, [Badu World Market](#), popularized by her interactive online livestream performances in 2020.

In every movement of hip-hop in Dallas, Badu has served as the culture’s omnipresent midwife, ensuring the maturation of the next generation of the city’s artistic stars—an honorable task for the Texas town’s most well-known ambassador, apart from its professional sports teams and the legendary 1980s soap opera. This independent hip-hop scene created by Free and her peers laid the foundation for fellow Dallas contemporaries like Rikki Blu, So-So Topic, Willow and Live, who carried the underground spirit of The Session into the present day. (In fact, the Badu World Market platform hosted Live’s album’s streaming party earlier this summer.)

Shortly after her Grammy Award-winning album *Baduizm*, the Dallas singer sought solace in New York among the Soulquarians, a Neo-Soul collective composed of D’Angelo, Questlove, J. Dilla, Roy Hargrove, James Poyser, Bilal, Pino Palladino, Q-Tip, Mos Def, Talib Kweli and Common. At the time, the artistic congregation was in alignment with the social and cultural Black politics of the late 1990s to early 2000s. While Bad Boy Entertainment modeled Black success through designer suits on MTV, the Soulquarians emulated reclamation of ancestral practices through music.





Artwork by Alfonso Apodaca

For Badu, New York operated as the amniotic fluid for her musical development on *Mama's Gun*, characterized by Rolling Stone as one of the top ten albums of 2000. The album's release corresponded to the communal feelings of the new millennium: published in a post Y2K world, the album held a multiplicity of contradictions, tensions, and experiences of Black women. At the time of recording, Badu was a 29-year-old mother who bathed and lived in Electric Lady Studios (the Greenwich Village recording studio commissioned by Jimi Hendrix), where a majority of the album was recorded.



A select portion of *Mama's Gun*, however, was recorded in Texas. Similar to *The Session*, Badu called upon musicians in the local scene like Geno Young who served as her musical director for the album. Sprinkled throughout the platinum-selling album are elements of her Dallas musical heritage.

In the years that followed, the Dallas singer ascended into her status as a cultural icon, a woman whose authenticity is intertwined with her mysticism as a living legend who walks among the streets of Dallas, her home.

Now 20 years removed from her sophomore album, the 49-year-old singer spends her time as a doula and midwife for expecting mothers. Recently, she provided her services for New York City R&B singer Teyana Taylor and the birth of her second child, Rue Rose.

Badu exists in a creative space as Dallas' doula: she is the vessel from which all creativity flows through, and draws from. She is the mother of countless artistic children who planted their roots from her wisdom. And for individuals like me she is a walking testimony, living proof that by remaining truly rooted in oneself, a twenty-something-year-old Black woman from Dallas possesses the ability to transform both the culture and the world.

Taylor Crumpton is a music, pop culture and politics writer from Dallas. Since she's began writing, Taylor's bylines has appeared on a variety of publications, including Pitchfork, Nylon, Playboy, Marie Claire and others.



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