

WHAT YOU Know

THERE'S BEEN A LOT OF TALK SINCE THE FATEFUL EARLY MORNING HOURS OF APRIL 11. BUT YOU CAN'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU HEAR. AND WHEN IT COMES TO THE PROOF SHOOTING, YOU HAVEN'T HEARD EVERYTHING—YET.

WORDS TAMARA WARREN



efore dawn on Tuesday, April 11, shots rang out behind the windowless, wood-plank facade of the C.C.C. club on Detroit's Eight Mile Road, and two men took bullets to the head. Thirty-two-year-old Deshaun "Proof" Holton was pronounced dead on arrival at the St. John Conner Creek Village outpatient facility. Thirty-five-year-old Keith Bender was admitted to St. John Hospital and Medical Center in critical condition.

A flurry of disbelief and grief spread across the city, as local television stations broadcast the initial reports. Proof was Eminem's best friend and a linchpin of the city's rap scene. Bender—a retired service man and a Desert Storm veteran—would die a week later, after being taken off life support, according to reports.

The day after the incident, Bender's cousin Mario Etheridge turned himself in to police. Etheridge, 28, who worked as a bouncer at the C.C.C. club, said he'd shot Proof in defense after Proof had shot Bender. Etheridge was charged with possession of a

concealed weapon and discharging a firearm in a dwelling or occupied structure. At press time, he had not been charged with the murder of Proof. An April 22 report in the *Detroit Free Press* stated, "Police have said Keith



Keith Bender

Bender and his cousin Mario Etheridge, an employee of the C.C.C. club, were playing pool when Bender got into a fight with Proof. Witnesses told police the rapper poked

Bender in the chest and Bender punched him. Proof drew a handgun and shot Bender in the face, police said. Etheridge shot Proof after the rapper stood over Bender, preparing to shoot again, police said."

Ten days later, on May 1, Bender's wife Jacqueline, and his mother, Leona, filed a wrongful death suit against the rapper's estate for unspecified monetary damages. Proof "violently assaulted and battered [Bender]," the suit claimed, "culminating with the infliction of a gunshot injury that caused the death of Mr. Bender."

Much of what happened at the C.C.C. club remains in question. Wayne County prosecutor Kym Worthy has been careful to note that the investigation is still open. "It's got to go through court process," Sergeant Omar Feliciano of the Detroit police press office says to XXL. "The case is still ongoing."

David Gorosh, a lawyer representing Proof's estate, tells XXL: "What's been heard is what's been told by Mr. Etheridge. Those facts are incomplete... A number of witnesses have come forward that contradict the notion that Proof shot Mr. Bender,"

adding that he cannot comment as to the identities of these witnesses, or to specific technical evidence, due to the ongoing investigation. "It's simply premature and unfair to suggest that Proof did anything wrong in this unfortunate tragedy.

"When the Detroit newspapers reported police sources, they were paraphrasing what some of the witnesses had claimed occurred," says Gorosh. "What the article should have said is that this is what *some of the witnesses* claimed. Police didn't say that happened. Police haven't come to conclusions. The Detroit police have in no way made conclusions about the way Mr. Bender was shot. At this time, the investigation is ongoing. It was easier for the newspaperers to say that's what police claimed, because it made a more efficient story for them."

At press time, forensics reports from the crime scene and ballistics reports on the weapons used to shoot Proof and Bender have not been released. According to the *Detroit News*, Albert Samuels, chief investigator for the Wayne County medical examiner's office, said that Proof's blood alcohol was .32, four times the state limit of .08 for intoxication, when he was killed. (Gorosh says that he is unaware that such information had been released to the public.) Bender's blood alcohol level has not yet been reported. He had a series of heart attacks three years ago, and was out celebrating the fact that a doctor had cleared him to have a pacemaker he'd been wearing since then removed.

Proof and Bender both attended Osborn High School, three miles from the club in northeast Detroit—the place where Eminem got his start rapping for crowds in the cafeteria, with Proof at his side. Though Bender's family has said that the two men did not know each other, Ronald Philpot, an old friend of

Proof's, remembers differently. "Proof knew him, I know that," says Philpot, a fellow MC who met Proof in ninth grade. "They both went out and lived their lives, but they started out in the same place and ended their lives at the same place. It's crazy. You see somebody in school, you never think your paths cross again."

Unfortunately, they crossed again in a dangerous place. C.C.C. is an infamous after-hours establishment (or, locally, a "blind pig") known for serving liquor after 2 a.m., which violates Michigan law. It's been raided 18 times in the last 10 years, and was host to a separate shooting as recently as February. (XXL was unable to locate C.C.C. club management for comment for this article.)



Proof's history with police has been widely reported. In November 2002, cops confiscated a 10mm pistol that a cleaning woman had found in his hotel room. He was given probation for drunk and disorderly conduct in 2003, and pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor assault and battery charge in 2005. Still, his friends say that the image being depicted by the press is at



Top: The C.C.C. club at 15304 East Eight Mile Road, Detroit. Above: April 26, 2006: Mario Etheridge (left) with his lawyer.

odds with the man they knew. "This man is not the animal they're portraying. He's a caring man, a very smart man," says Jimmie "Supa MC" Brown, an artist on Proof's Iron Fist Records who has known Proof since he was 14. "He didn't get his name on the streets because he was a killer. That wasn't him. He got a name on the streets because of his skills, because of his tenacity, because of his intelligence."

As his nickname "Mayor of Hip-Hop" attested, Proof was a singularly popular figure in the Detroit rap scene, with a long record of positive community works. He spoke to student groups at three local high schools this year, and at the time of his death, he was organizing a benefit for the family of his old group mate J Dilla, who died in February.

People in Proof's camp dispute the early reports of the C.C.C. club shooting, and have a hard time believing that the father of five initiated the use of weapons. Iron Fist Records president Cleveland "1st Born" Hurd, who is also an artist on the label, has known Proof for

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—David Gorosh, Proof's estate lawyer

11 years. "I've been in situations with him before where he's walked away," 1st Born says.

Many of those close to Proof believe the owners and employees of the C.C.C. club tampered with evidence in order to hide the truth from authorities. "[Police] were called, and the place was secured when they got there," says Sergeant Feliciano. "No parties were there, and then they called us. If someone kills somebody and they call 10 hours later, then that's the crime scene."

Proof's bodyguard for the last seven



April 19, 2006: Proof's funeral

years, Richard "Dolo" Castro points to the lack of security videotapes turned over to the police. Having accompanied Proof to the

C.C.C., he says, "I know for a fact that there's a camera that videotapes the outside and the inside. There's a TV that sits at the front door. If you ask any of the regulars, they'll tell you." Sergeant Feliciano says that police didn't know anything about any videotapes.

One longtime friend was with Proof at the C.C.C. on the morning of April 11. He spoke to XXL on the condition of anonymity, and tells a very different story than the one presented by Mario Etheridge

IN THESE Streets

The Detroit hip-hop community has suffered tragedy after tragedy. Where do they go from here?

Detroit seems haunted. Everywhere you look, there are images of dead rap artists on T-shirts. While the Super Bowl brought a glimpse of glitz and glamour, streets are eerie and empty once again. A dark shadow has been cast upon hip-hop. With the successive passing of J Dilla and Proof, two pillars of the community have been lost. As Motown mourns and searches for its spirit, the question looms: What comes now?

"J created the benchmark," says DJ Houseshoes, who was for years the resident DJ at the famed club St. Andrew's. "He made people want to emulate him. That was the soul of Detroit. With P, you got the heart of Detroit. That's all he did was involve himself with the community and take care of the people he felt needed to be taken care of. I don't know if Detroit can recover from this in the sense of music that is linked to that foundation."

The sense of loss is not isolated to hip-hop in Detroit. Tragedy is nothing new for a city that has grown synonymous with struggle. Despite its historic, strong Black middle class, almost one-third of Detroit residents live below the poverty line, qualifying it as the poorest city in America, according to census statistics released in August 2005. As of this January, its 8 percent unemployment rate ranked as the second worst among major American cities (following only the hurricane-battered New Orleans), with the continuing stagnation of the domestic auto industry largely to blame.

Such conditions make for a place rife with violent crime, and a hip-hop scene beset by the same. In January 2005, aspiring rapper Terrence Moore, who calls himself Mad Dog 13, shot and killed

Amjed Abdallah, owner of Studio 8, where Eminem recorded early in his career. In September 2004, Antonio "Wipeout" Caddell of the East Side Chedda Boyz was gunned down outside a downtown nightclub. Two days later, Darnell "Blade Icewood" Lyndsey of the Street Lordz (a.k.a. the Original Chedda Boyz) was paralyzed from the waist down in what may have been a related shooting—and was then murdered seven months later after releasing a diss record. This past New Year's Eve, Proof's Shady Records label mate Obie Trice was shot in the head while driving on the highway.

As is always the case, the atmosphere of the city informs the music made there, and Detroit's woes have fueled a rap sound that reflects its desperation. Some see it as a way to send out an SOS. "There's a lot of negative attention on Detroit," says Nick Speed, who produced 50 Cent's "What If" from the *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* soundtrack and is working on forthcoming albums from Lloyd Banks and 2Pac. "It's time to bring that through the music in addition to the interviews, the news, the TV. There's a lot of artists in Detroit that people haven't heard before. It's time for them to tell their story and show their way of life in what's considered to be a cutthroat town and talk about what's actually going down in the hood."

The caliber of artistry in Detroit was high enough to keep people like Dilla and Proof coming back to the city to work. And there are a host of rappers in position to carry the torch. Besides Dilla's former cohorts in Slum Village and Proof's D12, Royce Da 5'9", Trick Trick, Guilty Simpson, Tha Almighty Dreadnaughtz, Phat Kat, the Fat Killahz, Big Herk and Invincible are among the names catching a recent buzz on mixtapes, open mics and showcases.

"We still here," says Phat Kat, who has four J Dilla-produced tracks on his next album for Look Records. "As long as I'm here, Dilla gonna be here. Dilla got stuff for years to come. Long as Slum doing they thing, that whole movement, it don't stop. It's still going on."

Proof's Iron Fist Records artists—Woof Pak, Purple Gang and Supa MC—are determined to follow in their mentor's footsteps, too. "Proof wouldn't want us to stop," says Supa MC. "All the artists he influenced, in his honor we're going to keep this ball rolling. We going to keep smashing, keep coming out with the illst lyrics, the dopest beats. 'Til the whole world reconnects itself with Detroit and what we doing."

MC Marvwon of the Fat Killahz, who accompanied D12 on their last tour, agrees. "I think the numbness is about to wear off," he says. "We got to take lemons and make lemonade." —T.W.



January 4, 2005: The body of Amjed Abdallah is taken out of Studio 8.

“MARIO [ETHERIDGE] CAME OVER AND STARTED SHOOTING. FROM THERE, HE MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE SHOT HIS OWN COUSIN IN THE MIDST OF THE SHOOTING. PROOF WAS SHOT IN HIS BACK. THEY BOTH FELL DOWN.”

—Anonymous Eyewitness



April 14, 2006: Supa MC is comforted by a fellow mourner.

and press reports thus far. “We went to Coliseum first, then we went to Rolex, which are striptease establishments,” says Proof’s friend. “Then we went to an after party at the C.C.C. We got there after 2, it could have been after 2:30, around 2:45. We get in chill-out mode, play pool, and then we were getting ready to leave, at around 3:30. As we’re leaving, we saw two lovely specimens and went back in. I hollered at one of the girls. Proof went and talked to the other girl. We started chilling again, hollering at the ladies, no arguments had taken place. As I was near the pool table, that’s when I noticed, here goes an argument. I stopped talking to the girl, like, ‘What’s happening? They are having words. ‘I don’t care who you are,’ that’s what Keith was saying. Everybody was trying to get space in between them. It didn’t look like it was getting ready to turn violent. It looked like two guys just having words.

“After we separated them, Keith walked around to get closer. Keith was standing by the bar, and I was telling him to cool out, it’s not that serious. Proof was talking to one of the other guys. He’s complaining about Keith to the other guy. As Keith was standing there getting upset, he creeped around, that’s when he sucker punched Proof in the midst of the crowd. That’s where everybody gets to tussling, trying to separate them, trying to de-escalate the situation. That’s when the bouncer pulls out his gun and fired two shots in the ceiling.

“Proof got the gun from one of us, the people he came with. In defense of himself and his entourage, he went back on the other side of

the room to confront the bouncer about him pulling his gun out first. Keith started attacking Proof. He was trying to grab the gun from him. In the midst of them tussling, Proof may have

pistol-whipped the guy, I don’t know. As far as them fighting or whatever, that’s when Mario came over and started shooting. From there, he may or may not have shot his own cousin in the midst of the shooting. Proof was shot in his back. They both fell down.

“After the incident was over, Mario fell right away. All the evidence was contaminated. They started to lock the doors while we were in there, and they wanted us to cooperate with a story that Proof got shot at a Coney Island [local Detroit term for a 24-hour diner]. People started vanishing, those who didn’t want to cooperate, immediately following the situation. After Keith was taken out, they didn’t want to call 911. They wanted us to wait and get our stories to go along with their story.”

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