

# CRAZY GLUE!

BY E.E. BRADMAN PHOTOS BY SAYRE JOAN BERMAN

## IT SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN THIS WAY.

In a perfect world, Norwood Fisher and Fishbone would be superstars, a shining example of what can happen when smart lyrics, pop songwriting, stellar musicianship, a once-in-a-lifetime frontman, and a ridiculously badass rhythm section come together in a spicy, pan-genre gumbo. Norwood's hyperactive thumb and inventive lines should've made him a multi-platinum success like his peers Flea and Les Claypool. Fishbone's bass-tastic 1991 masterwork, *The Reality of My Surroundings*, should've been the breakthrough that propelled them into the mainstream. In fact, it's become all too common to think of Fishbone as the band that should've but didn't.

On this mellow Sunday in October, however, 46-year-old Norwood is anything but bitter about the path he's taken. Far from resentful, he's got a laid-back drawl, an elephant's memory, and an easy laugh; as we walk around Hollywood with his 10-year-old daughter Asé, it's obvious that clean living has done him good. His casual, SoCal outfit—sneakers,

shades, baggy jeans and T-shirt, and fedora—hides his signature single dreadlock, but not his salt-and-pepper goatee and big grin.

Fisher's smiles—and his struggles—are a central element of *Everyday Sunshine*, the Fishbone documentary released just as the band celebrates the 25th anniversary of its debut, *In Your Face*. The film shows how Fishbone's high-energy blend of ska, funk, punk, rock, gospel, and soul brought them right to the brink of mainstream success, and how a nasty cocktail of music-business shenanigans, nervous breakdowns, and interpersonal tensions dashed that dream, dooming them to a future of half-empty clubs and barely paying gigs.

The truth, however, is that although depressing finales make for good film (and good copy), Norwood is anything but struggling. The new Fishbone EP, *Crazy Glue*, proves he has lost none of his chops, enthusiasm, or humor, and his tone-right upfront, as always—is fatter than ever. Outside of Fishbone, he stays busy with his band Trulio Disgracias, leading and participating in jam sessions

## HOW NORWOOD FISHER HOLDS IT ALL TOGETHER



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around L.A., and developing fresh new bass chops (check the link below to see him explain his fanning, claw, and “hang loose” techniques). He has lent his bass talents to albums by Claypool, Jerry Cantrell, Everlast, and Matisyahu, toured with African-American comedy legend Blowfly, and produced artists such as Sista Otis and Myself. He’s excited to explore African rhythms and dancehall, he’s still not jaded about gear and tone, and he’s finding spiritual connections between his playing and his surfing, snowboarding, and running.

And therein lie the secrets behind Norwood’s grin: An exceptional career, a life lived to the hilt, wisdom, and a never-ending curiosity for life and new bass terrain.

**The documentary tells the whole story, warts and all. How did it feel to watch it for the first time?**

It was actually fun to watch. I’m not afraid of the rough spots and the pimples

and blemishes, because I learned something along the way. I’m still learning, and that’s the beauty of it.

I look back at the documentary and I can see how we put obstacles in our own way. We had amazing opportunities, and we took advantage of most of them, but we were also young and wild, and I think we got judged more harshly than some of our peers for our wildness. And some of that might have been because we’re black. Maybe. But it’s not really anyone’s fault, and if that’s part of the Fishbone obstacle course, so be it! [Laughs.]

**You don’t seem depressed about not achieving wider, mainstream success.**

You know, there’s a guy whose name was Frank Zappa [laughs]. He came before me, and he never reached the highest heights [of pop stardom], but he’s one of the most influential guys that ever was. I’m on the road with my band, and sometimes it’s a headache. But I’m still here, and I’m still

in the game. I enjoy every day.

**Your relationship with frontman Angelo Moore is the cornerstone of Fishbone. What advice would you give to bass players about partnership?**

Most human beings just want to be heard. Really being able to listen to what someone else is saying, on a deep level, will get you a long way. [Being in a long-term partnership] requires non-judgmental acceptance. Keep your eye on what’s most important: The music.

**Congratulations on the new album. It’s blazin’!**

Yeah, it’s rough and rugged, and it’s got an edge on it. It’s angsty! We wrote it for the kids. We just starting playing these songs live, and they’re already kickin’ ass.

**Do y’all rehearse much?**

We don’t, and sometimes I think that’s good, because we get tight on the road really fast. If we have a long tour, the songs get sophisticated by the end of the tour, and I

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- See Norwood Fisher rock three of his favorite techniques.
- Watch a trailer for *Everyday Sunshine*.
- Travel back to the good ol’ days with Fishbone’s 1991 video for “Sunless Saturdays.”

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The original Fishbone lineup in 1986. From left: drummer Philip "Fish" Fisher, trumpeter Walter Kibby II, guitarist Kendall Jones, frontman/saxophonist Angelo Moore, Norwood, and trombonist/keyboardist Chris Dowd.

## IN YOUR FACE

### 10 Classic Norwood Fisher Bass Lines

1. **"Party At Ground Zero,"** from their debut, self-titled EP from 1985. "I just wrote the intro, but me and Fish got writers' credits because Kendall wanted us to play one thing and we were like, 'We are not playing that.' We toiled until we came up with something we liked, and what we liked is what you hear. That's still one of my proudest moments."
2. **"When Problems Arise,"** from 1986's *In Your Face*, their first full-length. "That was another case of me and my brother working it out.

Kendall wrote that song, but we put our heads together and came up with what you hear. At the end of the day, Kendall gave us writers' credits."

3. **"Bonin' in the Boneyard,"** from 1988's *Truth and Soul*. "I wrote that bass line when I was about 16. I was trying to figure out how to slap, and then I saw this Asian dude slapping the hell out of a bass at a music store. I was at the right angle and I saw exactly what he was doing, and the tumblers clicked in my head. I took a bus home, picked up my bass, and I was doing it!"
4. **"So Many Millions,"** from 1991's *The Reality of My Surroundings*. "I really wanted a Fela-ish, Afrobeat-type groove, but Fish put that James Brown thang on it, and I wasn't gonna fight it. And the outro was just a feeling—I didn't know what I was doing. It was just a gut reaction, and Fish's reaction to that."
5. **"Everyday Sunshine,"** from *Reality*. "We've been playing that a lot lately because the documentary is called *Everyday Sunshine*. I came up with that bass line with a lot of guidance from Chris. It's so enjoyable for me to play, and it's me wearing my love for Larry Graham and Sly & the Family Stone on my sleeve."
6. **"Sunless Saturday,"** from *Reality*. "I like the relationship of the bass, the drums, and the guitar on 'Sunless Saturday'—it's like polyrhythmic hard rock. When I think about what we did there, I'm really proud of that moment."
7. **"Fight the Youth,"** from *Reality*. "I wasn't a fan of the lyrics or of hair rock, and Kendall's guitar parts were kinda hair rock. Me and my brother were like, 'OK, we're gonna put some stank on this thang.' And when we broke it down to the middle section where we locked up some James Brown-type shit? Dude!"
8. **"Properties of Propaganda (Fuk This Shit On Up),"** from 1993's *Give a Monkey a Brain and He'll Swear He's the Center of the Universe*. "That was an eruption of funk."
9. **"Lemon Meringue,"** from *Give a Monkey a Brain*. "That was the first time my soul came out."
10. **"Weed, Beer, and Cigarettes,"** from *Crazy Glue* (2011). "When I came up with that line, it was just a burst of energy. I wasn't thinking—I just did something, and when I did it, I kinda laughed at myself. Those are the ones that become my favorites. If it's stupid and I'm like, 'Boy, am I silly' while I'm doing it, then I kinda want to do that again."

like that evolution. When we first started, though, we practiced hard, almost every day, from 1979 to '83. We became very familiar with each other as musicians, and I think that's what made that original lineup stand out.

**What are the chances of the original lineup playing again?**

It's not out of the picture, but it's not a focus right now of any of the original members. I'm quite satisfied with the fact that we're all still alive, and if we do all make music together, I can only imagine how fun it would be. But you know what? I already have a band, and I actually love the guys I'm playing with.

**What was your early exposure to music?**

My father was a drummer, and his brothers were in a band called Smoke, on the Casablanca/Chocolate City label, home of Cameo and Parliament. They became Donna Summer's backup band for a while, and eventually, they put out a couple records. Gospel singer Ron Kenoly is my cousin on my mother's side, and we have plenty of other cousins who played music and did all sorts of stuff. My first gig, at age eight, was playing in church. I saw my first concert, Graham Central Station, around the same time.

**When did you first get hip to P-Funk's bass players?**

When I was about eight years old, my cousin visited for Christmas and brought over the first Funkadelic record [*Funkadelic*, 1970] and their third album, *America Eats Its Young* [1972]. His mother wouldn't let him play those records in her house, but my mother would. I remember sitting there listening to those records and being like, "Damn!" [Original Funkadelic bassist] Billy "Bass" Nelson is in my DNA.

Later on, Billy and I became good friends. He told me that when he was 16, he toured as a guitarist with the Parliaments, who got James Jamerson to play bass on their first tour, because George Clinton was a staff writer at Motown. And Billy asked Jamerson to teach him how to play bass.

**What did Billy Bass help you understand about Jamerson?**

How to be subversive as a bass player! [*Laughs.*] After I heard what Jamerson was doing on "I Was Made to Love Her," I went back and listened to "Bernadette" and all those songs he did with the Supremes, and

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I was like, “That James Jamerson dude is getting away with murder!” He was all over the place, but 100 percent in the pocket. If you weren’t really listening, though, all you heard was the song.

That’s my main goal. I want to get away with murder, but I don’t want to take away from the song. I know people are listening to me like I listened to Larry Graham and Billy Bass, so I try to keep that tradition—give ’em something to hang on to, but keep it about the song.

**What are some of your favorite live rhythm sections?**

I never got to watch [original Funkadelic drummer] Ramon “Tiki” Fulwood and Billy Bass do their thing, but all of us in Fishbone went to see the run of shows the P-Funk All-Stars did at the Beverly Theater in Hollywood in 1983. Rodney “Skeet” Curtis and Dennis Chambers were dark and nasty, but so sophisticated. I loved Earth, Wind & Fire, but it was “uptown.” I need it lowball, level to the ground, close to the gutter. Skeet and Dennis gave me all that,

but made it sophisticated, too.

I love how Daryl Jennifer and Earl Hudson from Bad Brains did their thang. They’re fusion cats; they can play their asses off. [Rush drummer] Neil Peart’s musicianship has always set the bar high, but the way he and Geddy Lee lock—dude! Tim “Herb” Alexander and Les Claypool with Primus, too. The way they relate, they have a tension and release, and a bounce, that’s so badass.

**When Fishbone was starting out, what bass lines did you learn?**

We cut our teeth playing a lot of Rush—I learned all those Geddy Lee bass lines from *Permanent Waves* [1980] and *Moving Pictures* [1981]. I loved P-Funk and Larry Graham, but I thought that if I learned how to play all that stuff, I would never get past it, so I didn’t learn it. Like most people, we started out playing covers, but very early in the game, “Dirty” Walt came to a rehearsal one day and said, “If we don’t write our own songs, we ain’t never go’ get nowhere.” So we stopped playing covers.

**Who do you listen to for inspiration?**

I listen to horn players like Fred Wesley and Maceo Parker for phrasing. I love [jazz pianist] Art Tatum, because he sounds like he’s having more fun than anybody else; he’s playful, but he’s serious as a heart attack. When I’m going into a writing zone, there are certain songwriters I keep going back to: Elvis Costello, Al Green, David Bowie, X, and of course, the Beatles. And lately, I’ve been listening to XTC again.

**Are you listening specifically to the bass parts?**

I’m listening to the songs and how the bass is sittin’ in the songs. All that stuff goes into what makes me the bass player and producer that I am.

**What kind of producer are you?**

I’m a “happy-guy” producer [*laughs*]. My main thing is to bring the best possible performance out of the musicians. I deal with people the way I want people to deal with me in the studio: I’m sensitive to artists, but I’m there when you need help with a good idea that could be so much better.

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## What's the best way for a bass player to prepare for a studio session?

Be ready to abandon whatever you've practiced [*laughs*]. It took me a long time to learn that one. As a young bass player coming into punk rock, I learned to play hard. Once I got in the studio, though, I figured out that I was playing way too hard.

As I grew older, I've learned how to be aggressive, but still have a softer touch. I don't use much EQ or compression anymore; I love the sound of my basses, and I'm at a stage where I've learned how to touch them and get what I want.

## What have you been working on?

I co-produced *Charmed* [9th Ward Records, 2010] by Sista Otis, a dreadlocked granola girl who blew my mind when I first saw her. She has so much soul, and her voice is so deep; we put a lot of love in that mother-fucker. I also co-produced Myself's album *Punk Floyd* [Couture Music Wear, 2011], a rock record done by a hip-hop guy who can really rock. I wanted to give it a classic rock vibe with punk/ska/reggae ele-

## MIGHTY LONG WAY A Selected Norwood Fisher Discography



With Fishbone *Crazy Glue* [2011, DC-Jam]; *Live* [2009, DC-Jam]; *Still Stuck in Your Throat* [2006, Discograph]; *Live in Amsterdam* [2005, High Times]; *Live at the Temple Bar and More* [2002, Ter a Terre]; *The Psychotic Friends Nuttwerx* [2000, Hollywood]; *Chim Chim's Badass Revenge* [1996, Rowdy]; *Give a Monkey a Brain and He'll Swear He's the Center of the Universe* [1993, Columbia]; *The Reality of My Surroundings* [1991, Columbia]; *Truth and Soul* [1988, Columbia]; *In Your Face* [1986, Columbia]. **With Kottonmouth Kings**

*Hidden Stash 5: Bong Loads & B-Sides* [2011]. **With Eric McFadden** *Bluebird on Fire* [2011]. **With Matisyahu** *Light* [2009, JDub/Epic]. **With Trulio Disgracias** *Nuttin's Gonna Git'choo If U Don't Look Out* [2007, Inna Nuttshell Reekordingz]. **With Angelo Moore** *Dr. Madd Vibe's Medicine Cabinet* [2005]. **With the Les Claypool Frog Brigade** *Purple Onion* [2002, Prawn Song]. **With Walter Kibby** *To Put It Bluntly* [2000]. **With Everlast** *Whitey Ford Sings the Blues* [1998, Tommy Boy]. **With Jerry Cantrell** *Boggy Depot* [1998, Columbia]. **With Kristen Vigard** *Kristen Vigard* [1988].

**AS A PRODUCER:** **With Sista Otis** *Charmed* [9th Ward Records, 2010]. **With Myself** *Punk Floyd* [Couture Music Wear, 2011]. **With various artists** *Look at All the Love We Found: A Tribute to Sublime* [2005, Cornerstone RAS]. **With Murphy's Law** *Best of Times* [Relativity, 1991]. **With the Red Hot Chili Peppers** "Show Me Your Soul," *Pretty Woman: Original Soundtrack* [1990, Capitol].

**AS A VOCALIST:** **With Electric Love Hogs** *Electric Love Hogs* [1992, London]. **With Red Hot Chili Peppers** *Uplift Mofo Party Plan* [1987, EMI]. **With Thelonious Monster** *Baby, You're Bummin' My Life Out in a Supreme Fashion* [1986, Epitaph].

**SEE NORWOOD WITH FISHBONE IN:** *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* [1988], *Back to the Beach* [1987], *The Tripper* [2006], and *Idlewild* [2006].

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ments, and I think we succeeded. They're two very different albums. I played bass on both sessions, and my brother Fish played drums on both, too.

**Your connection with Fish was a huge part of the Fishbone magic.**

We've been relating musically since I was six and he was four. My mom got me an acoustic guitar for Christmas, and he got a snare drum—Fish wanted to play drums like pops. Nobody was around to show me how to play chords, so I just started picking out bass lines, and we started writing our own songs right away. To this day, when we play together, the magic erupts.

**What advice would you have for bass players who want to lock with their drummers?**

I achieve it through conversation. I talk to Fish and [current Fishbone drummer] John Stewart about where we want the groove to sit and the effect we want to have on the dance floor—we'd calculate what we were doing. We talk about leaning the groove forward, laying it back, or playing it right dead on the beat, and we use our imagination to feel that. To be able to talk in those terms increases your ability to lock.

**How did you get your first bass?**

When I was eight, we were living deep in the hood in South Central L.A., where there

was lots of gang activity. I got a weight set for Christmas, and one of my cousins, concerned that I would grow up and become a thug, offered to give me a bass in exchange for my weights. He had a Fender Lead Bass II—like a P-Bass, but a little different—and he had a Peavey Mark IV amp with a 2x15 cabinet. He was like, "I'll trade you the bass and throw in the amp and the speaker cabinet. Oh, and I ain't gonna listen to rock music anymore, so you can have all my records." I gave him the weight set, and he gave me my life.

Last year, at Thanksgiving dinner, he was like, "So—you did a lot with that!" I thanked him. My life wouldn't be anywhere near the same if I hadn't made that trade.

**What were the first songs you learned?**

When I was about to turn 12, my cousin showed me how to play the Commodores' "Brick House," "You & I" by Rick James, and P-Funk's "Night of the Thumpasaurus Peoples." That set me off—I could hear a lot better, and I began to be able to pick out whatever was happening at the time. Not too long after that, I met my Fishbone guys.

**How did six black teenagers from South Central get turned on to punk rock?**

By '78, black radio in L.A. had begun playing Bob Marley and other reggae artists.

We were playing with these reggae rhythms we had begun hearing on the radio, and with our youthful energy and experimentation, we started speeding it up, as fast as we could play. I thought we had invented something new, but two or three days later, Dirty Walt came back with records by the English Beat and the Selector, and then we discovered the Two Tone documentary *Dance Craze* [1981].

Right around the same time, Angelo turned us on to Bad Brains, and more and more punk rock was starting to come up in the media. The Specials played *Saturday Night Live*, and then John Belushi brought Fear onto *SNL*, too. That was a badass band! I was diggin' where fusion was at; I listened to Rush, dabbled in Return To Forever, and really liked bands that could actually play. But I took a turn into this punk-rock realm, and it consumed me.

**What about the gospel elements of the Fishbone sound?**

We related to punk rock through a gospel lens. We went to church every Sunday, and it was like this [*sings double-time gospel feel*] in Baptist church—and if you go to sanctified church, it was even faster. So we were relating to it through that.

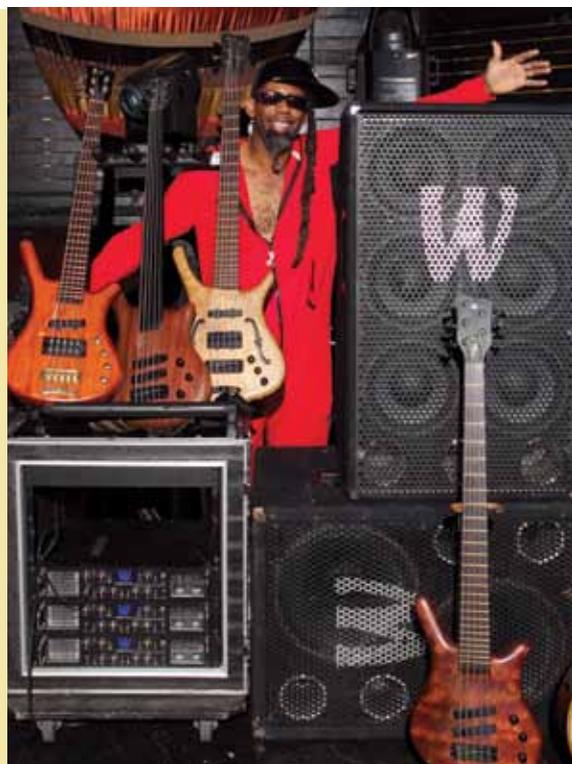
**How did the band develop such a hyper-**

## GHETTO SOUNDWAVE Norwood Fisher's Gear

In the early days, Norwood Fisher grooved on Fender, Peavey, Alembic, Ken Lawrence, and Spector basses—but thanks to Randy Jackson, he's been a staunch Warwick man since the 1980s. "Randy was a good friend of our producer, David Kahne, and after he saw us in the studio, he recommended that I check out Warwick. When we got our advance, I went to a music store in San Fernando Valley—I think it was the Bass Exchange—where [Stone Temple Pilots'] Rob and Dean DeLeo worked. Robert gave me a Warwick, and I didn't even plug the bass in. I just put the horn of the bass to my ear, hit a note, and let it ring, and ring, and ring. That's what I was looking for. God bless it, I felt the neck, and I was like, This is me. This is what I've been trying to get all this time."

Norwood's main basses these days are fretted Thumb, Corvette, and Infinity 5-strings, and he also rocks fretless Warwick Thumb and Alien acoustic 5-strings. He strings them with Dean Markleys, alternating between medium-lights and mediums. When it comes to effects, Norwood is a big fan of his Dunlop Bass Wah and his collection of Pigtronix pedals, which includes a Philosopher's Tone, EP2 Envelope Phaser, PolySaturator, Mothership, Disnortion, and an Attack/Sustain.

His rig consists of three 1,000-watt Warwick Tubepath 10.1 heads, two Warwick WCA 611 6x10 Pro cabs, and two custom Warwick 2x15 cabs. "Angelo complains that it's too loud, but I tell him, 'Hey, the bass is crucial. And it's not me that's making you lose your hearing!'" Norwood says, laughing.



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## active stage presence?

Well, being children of the '70s, we sat at home on Friday and Saturday nights and watched *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert* and *The Midnight Special*, where we'd seen all these performers like Kiss, P-Funk, and David Bowie. But really, seeing the Specials on *Saturday Night Live* made us realize that we had to move onstage, and we were young, so we had that energy naturally.

## What's your next musical adventure?

I've been thinking about an idea for a long time, a particular relationship to Afro-funk rhythms. I started working on it with Fish, but it's a place Fishbone hasn't really gone. And then John Stewart reacted to something I played in a way that sounded really African, and I felt like we had stumbled into the future of funk. And then I want to explore the metal/punk/dancehall connection we got into on the *Still Stuck in Your Throat* record.

## What are your ultimate goals as a musician?

Along with being subversive like James Jamerson, my other mission is to get my feelings out and to make people feel how music made me feel. However complex my feelings are and whatever they may be, I want to be open as an artist to lay them out. I'm trying to do it without the armor, which is why I let go of my vices. If life is painful, I want to feel it. If I'm hiding from something, I want to stop hiding and feel whatever this life really is.

## What would you recommend to someone who's interested in taking their playing to the next level?

One thing that has really helped me is taking on another discipline. Some people love to get into martial arts or yoga; surfing fully immerses me in nature, and for me, running is a moving meditation. Both things enhance my relationship to music. I'm sure sitting meditation and silencing the mind would have a profound effect on me musically, so that's my next frontier. **BP**



## EVERYDAY SUNSHINE: THE STORY OF FISHBONE

A DOCUMENTARY BY LEV ANDERSON &  
CHRIS METZLER

### IF IRREVERENT SOCIAL COMMENTARY

and extreme punk-funk insanity were your stock-and-trade, you couldn't do better than Fishbone in their prime. *Everyday Sunshine* attempts to recapture that energy, largely through the eyes of bassist and founder John "Norwood" Fisher and frontman Angelo Moore, and during the first half-hour, a few vintage live clips (including a party-like takeover of San Francisco's Warfield Theater) convey the manic message in all its chaotic glory.

When the film shifts its focus to the expectations that weighed down the band's sprawling funk-and-soul masterpiece, 1991's *The Reality of My Surroundings*, the mood turns bittersweet. Beset by ego clashes and guitarist Kendall Jones' well-publicized paranoid breakdown, not even Norwood, who was the glue that held the band together onstage and in the world, could keep the train going. Appearances by Ice-T, Vernon Reid, Perry Farrell, Gwen Stefani, Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson, and Flea (who gives it up for Norwood, openly admitting to "stealing" some of his best bass chops) lend the narrative some levity, but the harsh reality still lingers: Fishbone is a band that flew too close to the sun. While hope springs eternal for a full-fledged reunion of the original lineup, the road ahead is a tough one for Norwood and Angelo. They continue to soldier on with the odds stacked against them—not far from where they started as teenagers some 30 years ago, on the streets of South Central. —BILL MURPHY