

# BAD BLACK MOTHERFUCKERS!

“A black musician who had a white woman and a Cadillac was a bad motherfucker!”

—jazz pianist Hampton Hawes, *Get Up Off Me* (1973)



British and American whites most likely used the term “mother fucker” several hundred years ago, but we’re hearing it in common parlance today because it found a special resonance among black American men. As actor Ving Rhames, portraying boxing promoter Don King in HBO’s 1997 film *Only in America*, put it: “Black people don’t get no credit for nothing. All we’ve got is one word. That word is *motherfucker*.” Its popularity comes directly from the patois of early-twentieth-century ghetto hipsters and jazz musicians. They picked it up from their forbears.

But why did black men seize so passionately upon this particular linguistic pathology? Why did they have such ambivalent feelings of love and hostility toward their mothers—and women in general? Can it be traced to some residual resentment their ancestors harbored against the priestesses and matriarchs of West African societies, such as the powerful witches—called *iya wa*, or “the mothers”—of Nigerian Yoruba tribes who had been expelled from their polygamous families for not producing male children? Or did American slavery create its own twisted matriarchal arrangement by giving black women favored status over men?

Forty years ago, two black psychiatrists named William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs wrote a book called *Black Rage* in which they elaborated upon the second explanation. Yes, black women did have a special place in the American South—as mothers, or as mother surrogates such as aunts and grandmothers—but theirs was not a traditional matriarchy. Since the father, if he were around at all, was laboring all day at some exhausting menial job and held no real power in the family, it fell upon the mother to rear and care for the children and to serve as an intermediary between them and the hostile, white-supremacist society outside their door. She was, according to Drs. Grier and Cobbs, “the culture

bearer.... This is every mother's task. But the black mother has a more ominous message for her child and feels more urgently the need to get the message across. The child must know that the white world is dangerous and that if he does not understand its rules it may kill him."

This lesson was crucial under slavery, but its value hardly lessened during the harsh Jim Crow era when a black man could get lynched just for looking at a white woman with the wrong gleam in his eye, or at a white man with the wrong glint. "The black mother...must intuitively cut off and blunt his masculine assertiveness and aggression lest they put the boy's life in jeopardy." What she desperately did *not* want her child to become was a "bad nigger," overtly defiant against whites, because such a young man would almost certainly come to a bad end. "Even today [in 1968], the black man cannot become too aggressive without hazard to himself," the doctors wrote.

The result of this maternal crushing of the spirit was the compliant and accommodating "boy"—the word most Southern whites assigned to every black man, regardless of his age. Soul singer James Brown remembered in his 1986 autobiography how his Southern-born father related to whites: "He had a temper about white people, but he never showed it to them.... He'd call white people 'crackers,' curse 'em and everything when they weren't around, but when he was in front of them, he'd say, 'Yessir, nawsir.'" Likewise, novelist Richard Wright noted in *Native Son* (1939) how even in Harlem, far from the South, young black street hooligans avoided striking out against whites because it "trespass[ed] into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them; in short, it would be a symbolic challenge of the white world's rule over them; a challenge which they yearned to make, but were afraid to."

Loving, protective mothers created these men by thwarting children's youthful aggression in myriad small ways—with a sudden verbal slash, the back of a hand across the mouth, a switch across the shoulders, or some other capricious and humbling cruelty. "What at first seemed a random pattern of mothering has gradually assumed a definite and deliberate, if unconscious, method of preparing a black boy for his subordinate place in the world," wrote Grier and Cobbs. "As a result, black men develop considerable hostility toward black women as the inhibiting instruments of an oppressive system. The woman has more power, more accessibility into the system, and therefore she is more feared, while at the same time envied."

The doctors observed that one result of this maternal wounding was that black men were susceptible to a sudden welling up of emotionless tears whenever they saw another man, such as an athlete, entertainer, or

politician, "standing supreme in a moment of personal glory." As they explained this strange weeping: "The tears are for what he might have achieved if he had not been held back...by some inner command not to excel, not to achieve, not to become outstanding, not to draw attention to himself." The source of this command, the man realized, was his mother. "Only *she* was so concerned with his behavior and *she* was most concerned that he be modest and self-effacing. And when he sees that his grief is over lost achievement, relinquished at the behest of his mother, he becomes enraged with her."

There is an old joke, told mostly by blacks amongst themselves, about a little boy sitting in the kitchen watching his mother dip pieces of chicken into white flour before she drops them into the frying pan. He playfully pokes his fingers into the flour, dabs it all over his face, and says, "Look, Ma, I'm white!"

She looks up and asks, "What did you say?" As he's in the middle of repeating himself, her open hand flies out of nowhere and slaps his face. "Don't you ever say that again!" she warns him, with a bitter edge in her voice.

The boy runs crying from the kitchen into the warm, enfolding arms of his Aunt Nell in the next room. She murmurs, "Honey baby, what's wrong?"

"Mommy slapped me."

"Why did she do that?"

"Cause I said I was white."

Aunt Nell slaps him across the face and says, "Don't you *never* say that again!"

Crying even harder now, he runs to his grandmother. Leaning over with deep concern in her kindly face, she asks, "What's wrong, little one?"

"Mommy and Aunt Nell slapped me!"

"Now, now, baby, tell your granny why'd they do something like that?"

"Cause I said I was white."

Granny slaps him even harder, almost knocking him down. Some of the flour comes off on her hand. "Don't you *never* say that again," she snaps. Then, in a calmer voice, she asks, "Now baby, what did you just learn?"

"I-I-I learned," he sniffles, "that I been white now for only two minutes and I already hate you black motherfuckers!"

James Baldwin perhaps said it best in his 1964 play *Blues For Mr. Charlie*: "manhood is a dangerous pursuit here." Just walking into a country store and asking for a can of Prince Albert tobacco without saying *Mister* Prince Albert (since a picture of a white man was on the

label) could get a Negro into trouble. Baldwin based *Blues For Mister Charlie* on a 1955 murder of a black Chicago teenager whose mother hadn't properly schooled him on how to act around white Southerners. Emmett Till was visiting his relatives in Mississippi when he became too familiar with the young wife of a storekeeper. Three days later two men kidnapped him from a relative's house, beat him to a pulp, shot him, wrapped barbed wire around his neck, and dumped his body into a river.

In order to function under such intimidation, young black males—like anyone constrained by severe rules and demands—needed some means of expressing their rage and coming to grips with their own emerging manhood. That's why they admired the explosive, terrifying “bad nigger” their mothers had warned them about. The bad nigger, also called “crazy nigger,” was bad for everybody all around, an ill wind that blew nobody any good. He stirred up all the trouble that lay just beneath the surface of everyday life. He was especially dangerous because his open defiance—his “bad attitude”—drew fire upon the other black people around him. And yet, since bad niggers “terrified the Negro community and in a sense provided a negative model for ‘nice families,’ such men had profound importance for the Negro community,” said Drs. Grier and Cobbs. “They provided the measure of manhood for all black men.”

Within that context, the word *bad*—coming off a protective mother's admonishing tongue—took on an ironic power of its own. *Bad* came to mean good, and *baad* was even better. As sociologist H.C. Brearley wrote in a 1939 essay in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* called “Ba-ad Nigger,” “an emphasis on heroic deviltry is so marked that the very word *bad* often loses its original significance and may be used as an epithet of honor.” A black man didn't just call “a local hero” bad, said Brearley; “he calls him ‘ba-ad.’ The more he prolongs the *a*, the greater is his homage.” No wonder the first successful blaxploitation film, released in 1971, called *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, was actor-director Melvin Van Peebles's story of a black gigolo who kills two white cops while defending a Black Panther and makes a successful run for the Mexican border to save his *baad* black ass. As for the word *nigger*, it certainly had its own backhanded honor among blacks, but at the same time it was so laden with powerlessness and humiliation that something was needed to replace it. Since the young black anti-hero had to first stand up to the mother who represented the powerful system before he could defy the system itself, who better to put her in her place than a “bad motherfucker”?

But in order to survive and thrive, the bad motherfucker had to possess more finesse than the bad nigger. The bad nigger was too flat-out

crazy, too brazen and reckless for his own good. Even the twentieth century's first famous bad nigger, heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson, had to flee to Paris to escape a one-year prison sentence under the 1910 White Slave Traffic Act, better known as the Mann Act, which Congress reportedly enacted with him in mind because of his notoriously extravagant taste for white women. As H. Rap Brown described the bad nigger in a 1969 essay called “Die, Nigger, Die,” “He was rebelling against the way the deck was stacked against him, and even his rebellion was a stacked deck.” He wasn't likely to grow into the eminence of old age. He lashed out, he made his point, maybe he fought the law and scared a few people and scored some high-falutin' pussy, but in the end he usually found himself up a tree in one way or another.

The bad motherfucker, on the other hand, had a chance of winning. Though the bad nigger may have had a few tricks up his sleeve, the bad motherfucker was a trickster to his core. He knew that white society held no future for him, so he made his own rules and spoke his own patois. Working a “slave”—a menial, low-paying job, generally for a white boss—was beneath him. His success had to come from gambling, pimping (either supplying women for other men or being a gigolo), selling dope, fencing stolen goods, and otherwise using his mother wit to game the white man's economic system by exploiting everyone around him. Better yet, he was a musician or an athlete, admired by other black men—and women. *Especially* women. As Charles Keil pointed out in 1966 in *Urban Blues*, the most popular blues/soul singers among women were the ones who, like Bobby Bland and Wilson Pickett, presented themselves onstage as bad motherfuckers. So the bad motherfucker wasn't just figuratively fucking his own mother; he was literally fucking other young men's mothers. He knew the ropes, the street, the con. He was quick and slick on his feet and, more importantly, quick and slick with his words, because words and ideas have real power in an environment where nobody owns much of anything. As H. Rap Brown put it, “In [our] world, the heroes were bloods who will never be remembered outside our Black community. Cats like Pie-man, Ig, Yank, Smokey, Hawk, Lil Nel—all bad muthafuckas. Young bloods wanted to be like these brothers. They were the men in our community. They had all the women and had made their way to the top through [local] sports and knowing the streets.”

With the coming of the Civil Rights movement, the 1960s provided the bad motherfucker outside of the South with a new political avenue, in open defiance of white society and its kangaroo justice system. After a 1965 race riot devastated Los Angeles's Watts ghetto, two Oakland, California,

college students named Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party For Self Defense. Their rallying cry was “All power to the people,” and since one of those powers, spelled out in the Second Amendment to the Constitution, was the right to bear arms, Newton and Seale recruited armed young men and women to protect Oakland’s black neighborhoods from the city’s police. Poet-activist Amiri Baraka, who was then known as LeRoi Jones, recalled how seeing photos of Seale and other Panthers “on the front page with their heat strapped on or in hand did something wonderful to us. It pumped us up bigger than life. Black men demanding democracy and justice and ready to fight about it. Those were heady times.” These black John Waynes didn’t call each other mere motherfuckers, because the word standing alone was reserved for their worst enemies, as when Panther leader David Hilliard claimed, “Fuck that motherfucking man. We will kill [President] Richard Nixon. We will kill any motherfucker who stands in the way of our freedom,” and Bobby Seale wrote, “[Newton] never forgot about the people. He’d bring it right down to the food, and the bread and employment, decent housing, decent education—the way the motherfuckers, the President, and all, fucked over us.” They referred to the U.S. government as “the imperialist motherfucker.”

On the other hand, the Panthers themselves, everyone agreed, were *bad* motherfuckers, which flipped the word around completely, from contempt to admiration. Seale proclaimed Huey Newton to be “the baddest motherfucker ever to set foot in history,” because he “stood up in the heart of the ghetto, at night, in alleys, confronted by racist pigs with guns and said... ‘I’m not going to allow you to brutalize me. I’m going to stop you from brutalizing my people.... If you shoot at me, I’m shooting back.’” Another Panther, George Jackson, said of fellow Panther James Carr: “Jimmy was the baddest motherfucker!” Unfortunately, as their mothers would have told them, the armed, in-your-face recklessness of the Black Panthers eventually brought the weight of the nation’s law and order down upon them. Newton and hundreds of other Panthers went to prison, and twenty-seven were killed in battles with police and federal agents. Sometimes a bad motherfucker, like the earlier bad nigger, was too bad for his own good.

To understand the power of the word *motherfucker* in the black community, you have to look at the way a young male, from puberty to his late teenage years, traditionally established his virility—his badness—and his place in the neighborhood pecking order by playing a game called “the dozens,” in which he challenged his friends and rivals by denigrating the morality, looks, intelligence, and skin color of their family members—especially their mothers. In fact, “playing the dozens”

or putting someone “in the dozens” often meant verbally fucking or sexually shaming another guy’s mother. The point was that if your mother was a lowdown dirty slut lacking even a shred of decency, what the fuck did that make you?

Some experts, such as Geneva Smitherman, speculate that the term came from the New Orleans slave markets, where deformed, crippled, and otherwise low-grade slaves were sold in lots of “cheap dozens”—a humiliation among the slaves themselves. Other sources say it comes from an original challenge requiring twelve insults, each worse than the one before, as in “I fucked your mama one, she said, ‘You’ve just begun’... I fucked your mama seven, she said, ‘Lordy, I think I’m up in heaven,’” and so on up to twelve. (This game of twelve insults may have been the inspiration for the popular 1923 Trixie Smith blues song called “My Man Rocks Me (With One Steady Roll),” whose verses began with references to looking at the clock—such as “I looked at the clock and the clock struck three, I said, ‘Baby, whooooo!’”—from one to twelve. This song structure eventually led in 1954 to “Rock Around the Clock,” rock ‘n’ roll’s first million-selling record.)

H. Rap Brown recalled that he and his buddies “played the dozens for recreation, like white folks play Scrabble.” An example:

I fucked your mama  
Till she went blind,  
Her breath smells bad,  
But she sure can grind.  
I fucked your mama  
For a solid hour.  
Baby came out  
Screaming “Black Power!”

Anthropology Professor Roger Abrahams of the University of Texas quoted a similar rhyme in a 1962 article for *Journal of American Folklore*:

I fucked your mother on an electric wire,  
I made her pussy rise higher and higher.  
I fucked your mother between two cans.  
Up jumped a baby and hollers, “Superman!”

Brown explained, “The real aim of the dozens was to get a dude so mad that he’d cry or get mad enough to fight. You’d say shit like, ‘Man,

tell your mama to stop coming around my house all the time. I'm tired of fucking her and I think you should know that it ain't no accident you look like me.' And it could go on for hours sometimes."

Amiri Baraka called the dozens "the African Recrimination Songs" that held lessons for every black kid: "How to rhyme. How to reach in your head to its outermost reaches. How to invent and create. Your mother's a man—Your father's a woman. Your mother drink her own bathwater—Your mother drink other people's. Your mother wear combat boots—Your mother don't wear no shoes at all with her country ass.... I fucked your mama under a tree, she told everybody she wanted to marry me. I fucked your mama in the corner saloon, people want to know was I fucking a baboon."

Richard Pryor dealt peripherally with the dozens during the filming of his 1983 concert movie *Richard Pryor Here and Now* in New Orleans. Momentarily caught off guard by someone shouting, "How's yo' mama?" he fired back, "Wh—how's my mama? I beg your pardon. I'll slap you in the mouth with my dick. One at a time, please. I'ma finish with this motherfucker ask me 'bout my mama. How's yo' mama? We be some mama-callin' motherfuckers this evening."

Yo' [your] mama, in fact, has become a catchphrase from the dozens that has spread into the general culture, as in "Yo' mama so ugly, they filmed *Gorillas in the Mist* in her shower!" or "Yo' mama is on my top ten list of things to do." (The contraction is nothing new: Kokomo Arnold, one of the first popular American blues musicians of the 1930s, recorded a song called "Twelves," in which he boasted about fucking an entire family: "I like yo' mama—sister, too.... Yo' mama, yo' daddy, yo' greasy greasy grandnanny.") The term has become so popular—some would say overused—that now it's mostly a defiant retort—"Yo' mama!"—that requires nothing further, except perhaps a clutching of the crotch for emphasis. In fact, over the last twenty years the mother-trashing aspect of the dozens has become an institution in American culture, with its own TV insult show (MTV's *Yo Momma*, which debuted in 2006), weekly *Saturday Night Live* routine (Chris Rock's "Mother Joke of the Day" segments during the 1993 season), books (James Percely's series of "yo' mama" *Snaps* joke books throughout the nineties, as well as Andrew Barlow and Kent Roberts's 2005 nerdy deconstruction of the dozens, including "Yo mama's so poor, her hierarchy of needs—determined per the definition of humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow—begins, like everyone else's, with water, food, and safety, but it does not go very far beyond 'safety' before it includes needs she cannot ever hope to meet," in *A Portrait of Yo Mama as a Young Man*), and recordings (such as the

Pharcyde's "Ya' Mama" and rap parodist MC Hawking's 2004 download "The Dozens," with lines like "Yo' mama's such a slut, the other night I had to park my dick on her ass and wait an hour to get in").

But why have the dozens been such an integral part of African American society over the past hundred years or more? In the late 1960s Swedish social anthropologist Ulf Hannerz studied ghetto boys playing the dozens in Washington, D.C., where the jousting was called "joning." Among the examples he recorded were:

I fucked your mother on top of a wall.  
That woman had pussy like a basketball.  
I fucked your mother from house to house.  
She thought my dick was Mighty Mouse.

and

I fucked your mother on a car.  
She said, "Tim—you're going too far."  
I fucked your mother in a Jeep  
She said, "Kenny—you're going too deep."

Hannerz theorized: "The boys have supposedly just found out that they have identified with the wrong person, the mother. Now they must do their utmost to ridicule her and thus convince everybody and themselves—but particularly themselves—of their masculinity and independence."

Roger Abrahams believed that playing the dozens was valuable for the black boy raised by a mother or other female family member, because "it has been a woman who has...threatened his potential virility with her values and her authority.... So he must exorcise her influence. He therefore creates a playground which enables him to attack some other person's mother, in full knowledge that that person must come back and insult his own. Thus someone else is doing the job for him, and between them they are castigating all that is feminine, frail, unmanly."

In 1939 Yale psychologist John Dollard, in an article called "The Dozens: Dialectic of Insult" for the magazine *American Imago*, took the subject into more forbidden territory when he wrote that

the point of the game seems to be to bring up matters painful to the other person. The physical self of the addressed person is derogated; he is sometimes accused of incestuous behavior; adulterous acts are alleged on the part of persons "sacred" to him,

i.e., those toward whom the accused does not himself have conscious sexual wishes.... It is evidently this element of exposure of the other person's unconscious wishes which is crucial. When the taunting speaker hits his unconscious mark he describes a repressed wish struggling for expression in his hearer.

At the same time, said Dollard, the speaker's "verbal expression of forbidden acts are in themselves gratifying," and his "accusations...represent in most cases repressed wishes of his own."

Hannerz was convinced that boys and young men were using the dozens to work through their conflicted feelings toward their mothers, because they generally abandoned the game by the time they reached adulthood and turned their attentions elsewhere. "It is clear in this case that the boys are not modeling themselves closely on the pattern of adult males, as the latter have stopped rhyming about their mothers," he wrote. Once the young man has reached an age where he's out from under his mother's authority, he no longer has the unconscious desire to goad other boys into insulting her.

But he doesn't leave the dynamics and the skills of the dozens behind. They've simply trained him for the next stage of development: standing up for himself in a more refined ritual, called "signifying." In its basic form, signifying is the elaborate use of innuendo to insult, tell on, or manipulate someone else by saying one thing but meaning another. The most famous illustration is the so-called "signifying monkey" of black folklore. The monkey is a little trickster who tells his jungle neighbor, a lion, that a local elephant has been saying terrible things about his family; if the lion was hip, he'd know that the monkey was just fucking with him, but instead he falls for the ruse and angrily heads off to challenge that dirty motherfuckin' elephant. As you might expect, the larger, more powerful pachyderm stomps the lion's sorry ass into the ground, which the lion deserves for being a chump, and the monkey gets a little jungle cred for setting it all into motion.

In the real world, black men signify not so much to stir up trouble between their neighbors (called "selling woof tickets"), but rather to show off the wit and verbal agility they've picked up from all those young years of playing the dozens. According to H. Rap Brown, "Signifying is more humane [than the dozens]. Instead of coming down on somebody's mother, you come down on them." One form of signifying is the rap, where a silver-tongued narrator puts himself into a scenario where he's the baddest cat around—out-fucking, out-fighting, and outsmarting everybody else (including the listener). As

an example, Brown (who got his nickname from his rapping ability), recalls one of his own routines:

Rap is my name and love is my game,  
I'm the bed-tucker, the cock\* plucker, the motherfucker,  
the milkshaker, the record breaker, the population maker,  
the gun-slinger, the baby bringer,  
the hum-dinger, the pussy ringer...  
Women fight for my delight.  
I'm a bad motherfucker.

\* Cock here has its Southern meaning: a girl's vagina.

Then there's the more epic and hyperbolic version of signifying, called "the toast," which Roger Abrahams describes as "a narrative poem" recited "in a theatrical manner.... The subject treated is freedom of the body through superhuman feats and of the spirit through acts that are free of restrictive social mores (or in direct violation of them), especially in respect of crime and violence." They were basically street ballads, spoken rather than sung. In a culture dependent upon oral traditions going back to the *griots*—tribal historians and genealogists—of Western Africa, the heroes of the toast were often the ultimate bad mammy-jammers, the archetypes of motherfuckerdome. And the silver-tongued dudes who told these tales, confined only by the limits of their imaginations and oral skills, shared in the glory and infamy of these fantastic characters as they ran them through their epic paces. The toast's most famous, baddest motherfuckers were Shine, Stagolee, and Dan Tucker, archetypes created during slavery and later, in the case of Shine and Stagolee, inserted into historical events.

For example, when the British luxury liner R.M.S. *Titanic* sank in 1912 and carried fifteen hundred poor souls to the bottom of the Atlantic, many American blacks felt a sense of relief—and comeuppance. Since there were no Negroes among the crew or passengers, they didn't have to give up their seats on the lifeboats and go down with the ship, which under normal circumstances would have been their fate. But in the media storm that followed the tragedy, a popular toast began to spread through black American neighborhoods detailing what might have happened if a certain slick motherfucker named Shine had been aboard. The story had taken form in the late nineteenth century, sometime after Reconstruction, when blacks began migrating to Northern cities. But its roots went farther back into slavery. For example, one version of "Shine on the *Titanic*" began with the line "It was 1849 when the great *Titanic*

went down.” Anthropologist Neil A. Eddington offered another version that began “The 30<sup>th</sup> of May was a hell of a day, that’s the day when the *Titanic* sunk”—even though the ship went down on April 14. Street chroniclers had simply updated the story by making it more newsworthy, without bothering to change the date of what had been some earlier disaster on an American lake or river.

“It was hell, hell, it was some fucked-up times, when that *Titanic* hit that iceberg and began to go down,” went one version of the story. Shine was either a cook in the scullery or a boiler room worker in charge of one of the *Titanic*’s powerful engines; in either case, he went topside to warn the captain that water was pouring in below. Though the captain assured him that it was okay to return to his post because the giant pumps would keep the water out, Shine was having none of it: “I’m gon’ take my chances in jumping overboard.... I’m going overboard when that water reach my ass.” Before long, as it dawns on everyone else that the situation is dire, the captain’s wife says, “Shine, Shine, please save poor me, I’ll give you all the pussy you can see.” But Shine tells her, “I got pussy on land, I got pussy on sea, I got twenty-five motherfuckers in New York just waitin’ on me.” Then the captain’s pregnant young daughter begs, “Shine, please save poor me; I’ll name this kid after thee.” Shine says, “Bitch, you went and got knocked up, that’s fine, but you got to hit this water just like old Shine.” Then the millionaires beg, “Now, Shine, oh, Shine, save poor me, we’ll make you wealthier than one Shine can be.” But Shine, hip to their empty promises, tells them, “You hate my color and you hate my race; jump overboard and give those sharks a chase.”

At that point Shine leaves the sinking ship. “Say, Shine hit the water with a hell of a splash, and everybody wondered if that black son-ovabitch could last. Say, the Devil looked up from hell and grinned, say, ‘He’s a black, swimmin’ motherfucker. I think he’s gon’ come on in.’” In one version, on the way to shore he fucks a forty-foot whale’s blowhole. In another version a shark pulls up next to him and says, “Shine, Shine, you swim so fine, you miss one stroke and your black ass is mine.” Shine replies, “You may be king of the ocean, king of the sea, but you gotta be a swimmin’ motherfucker to out-swim me.”

When he reaches a port town (in one variation it’s Harlem), Shine heads straight for a bar, kicks down the door, and demands a hot rum toddy. In one toast he decides to fuck everybody in the place, male and female, and cuts a swath through them as efficiently as that iceberg had sliced through the *Titanic*’s steel hull; in another he gets too drunk before he has a chance to fuck anybody, and then “a little green fly flew up Shine’s ass and tickled Shine to death.” At that point Satan down in

hell says, “All you bitches, you better climb the motherfuckin’ wall, ’cause Shine gon’ come back down here and fuck us all!”

According to author Langston Hughes, in a 1951 *Negro Digest* article called “Jokes Negroes Tell on Themselves,” the stud motherfucker in hell was a common motif in black jokes and folklore. “No sooner did the Negro set foot in hell than he grabbed the Devil’s daughter and ruined her. Ten minutes later he enticed the Devil’s wife behind a hot rock and ruined her. About this time the Devil’s mother came along. The Negro grabbed her and ruined her. The Devil suddenly became aware of this mighty despoliation. Trembling, for the first time since he had been ruler of hell, he fell to his knees and called on God for help, ‘Lord, please, take this Negro out of here before he ruins me!’”

Hughes, of course, had to clean up the toast’s colorful prose for publication, and by so doing he also destroyed the meter of its poetry. In their 1968 Columbia University research project, detailed in a paper called “The Use of Language in the Speech Community,” William Labov and his colleagues discussed the toast’s elaborate rhythms and internal rhymes in the hands of a veteran street storyteller.

The word *motherfucker* is used over and over again in just this way [to break up the regular meter]; by itself it would occupy a full half-line *A motherfucker*, but it is never used this way. Instead we have such intricate rhythms as:

Shine said, “You round here lookin’  
like a pregnant pup.  
Go find that motherfucker that  
knocked your ass up.”

Following another example, this time of the signifying monkey, the researchers state:

Again, *motherfucker* is a decoration on the basic rhythm which prevents any reversion to a doggerel meter.

He said, “He’s a big burly motherfucker, weigh about  
ten thousand pounds,  
When he walk, he shake the motherfuckin’ grounds.”  
Say, “He a big peanut-eatin’  
motherfucker, big long flappy ears,  
Been turnin’ out these parts for the last ten years.”

Probably the most famous toast is for Stagolee—or Staggerlee or Stackerlee or Stack Lee—who has been celebrated in countless blues recordings going back to the 1920s, not to mention Lloyd Price’s sanitized R&B paean (“Stagger Lee”) that stayed at number one on America’s pop charts for four weeks in 1959. But mostly he was the center of an oral soap opera that black people regaled each other with around a fire, a dinner table, or a bottle of whiskey at the end of another hard and humiliating day in Jim Crow America. Cecil Brown, the author of *Stagolee Shot Billy*, recounted that when he was a boy on a North Carolina tobacco farm in the late 1950s, “to young black field hands sitting in the shade of a tree at the end of the tobacco road, Stagolee was as impulsive, as vulgar, as daring, and as adventurous as they wanted him (and themselves) to be. My uncles, who were my male role models, and their friends recited their rhymed, obscene praise of Stagolee’s badness.”

The real Stagolee was a thirty-one-year-old pimp, nightclub proprietor, and riverboat line owner (the *Stack Lee* was one of his boats) named Lee Sheldon, who shot a local grifter named Billy Lyons in a St. Louis saloon on Christmas day of 1895. Because Sheldon and his victim were both well known in the black community, his trial got a lot of press, even in the white papers. Sheldon was sentenced to the Jefferson City Penitentiary for thirteen years. After a brief parole in 1909, he returned to prison for another crime and died there of tuberculosis in 1912. Though his murder of Lyons was well documented, it’s anyone’s guess how much of the various Stagolee toasts were based on his own exploits and what was borrowed from earlier folk ballads. Certainly his milieu—St. Louis’s thriving whorehouse district—made him an ideal figure for black folklore, thanks in part to the growing presence of blues-singing levee camp workers, muleskinners (dirt graders), and steamboat roustabouts working up and down the Mississippi River, who used the basic template of his story as a framework for their own defiance, imagination, and wishful thinking. It didn’t take long for “Stack Lee” Sheldon to morph into bad-ass superman Stag Lee, loved by women, respected by black men, feared by white men, and causer of trouble wherever he went.

In one well-known version, he stopped in at a dive called the Bucket of Blood for a bite to eat and got offended when the bartender slid “a stale glass of water” and “a fucked-up piece of meat” onto the bar.

I said, “Raise, motherfucker, do you know who I am?”

He said, “Frankly, motherfucker, I just don’t give a damn.”

I knowed right then that chickenshit was dead.

I throwed a thirty-eight shell through his motherfucking head.

Musicologist Alan Lomax discovered “Stagolee” in ballad form during a field trip down the lower Mississippi around 1910, while Sheldon was still alive. From 1924 to the present, the song has been recorded more than two hundred times, but perhaps the most definitive version is Mississippi John Hurt’s 1928 Delta blues classic, “Stagolee.” Stagolee had a reputation as “a bad motherfucker” in the song’s informal street versions. In fact, “I’m a bad motherfucker” was traditionally the final line. But Hurt and the other blues singers who told his story on wax couldn’t say those words, so something very primal and integral to Stagolee’s story was always missing.

There were many other bad motherfuckers immortalized in street poetry, such as Joe the Grinder, Pimpin’ Sam from Alabam, Stavlin’ Chain, Dolomite, and Petey Wheatstraw the Devil’s Son-in-Law, but the most successful within the commercial music business was Dan Tucker, or Bad Man Dan, who possessed such verve and prowess that women instantly fell under his spell. Dan could fight with his fists or his gun, but he was generally too busy romancing the most beautiful and rich women in town, black and white. Of course, whenever his story was presented for public entertainment beyond the street corner and neighborhood bar, Dan had to be toned down and his trysts restricted to the dark side of the tracks, where he couldn’t commit any transgression like fucking the white mayor’s daughter in the ass. Dan Tucker popped up everywhere in the early music industry. In nineteenth-century minstrel shows he was Dan Tucker, Dan Cupid, or Jim Dandy. (Dandy would show up again in 1956, when R&B singer LaVern Baker praised his various rescues on the national pop charts.) In the 1890s May Irwin recorded a hit called “Crappy Dan,” with the lyric: “My name is Crappy Dan, I’m a spo’tin’ man” (a “sportin’” man, i.e., a pimp). Sheet music exists for a 1921 song called “The Lady’s Man, Dapper Dan from Dixieland,” notable for a section in which Dan, a Pullman porter (a prestige job for blacks in those days), shouted the names of passing towns where he had various women waiting for him. Several years later, blues empress Bessie Smith sang his praises in “Hustlin’ Dan” and “Kitchen Man”—“wild about his turnip tops, like the way he warms my chops.” In 1937 Georgia White revealed the exploits of “Dan the Backdoor Man”—a common reference in blues music to a stud sneaking in the back door as the woman’s boyfriend or husband is heading off to work. Songwriters welcomed Dan as a handy man to have around, if only because his name rhymed with handy man, or lover man. But Dan Tucker the baddest motherfucker, well, songwriters couldn’t be seen with him in Tin Pan Alley. On the 1957 single “Deacon Dan Tucker,”

singer-songwriter Jesse Belvin had to settle for “I’m Deacon Dan Tucker, and I’m looking for a pretty girl.”

Dan did make his way near the top of the pop charts in 1951 when a polished black vocal group called the Dominoes recorded a million-selling song—co-written by a middle-aged Jewish woman and a young black choir leader—called “Sixty-Minute Man.” In a basso profundo, singer Bill Brown boasted, “Listen here, girls, I’m telling you now, come up and see ol’ Dan. I rock ’em, roll ’em, all night long, I’m a sixty-minute man.” Radio stations wouldn’t spin it, because Miss Anne might hear it and get her ears singed, and then the FCC would bust through the doors and rip their broadcasting licenses off the walls, but thanks to the ever-present jukebox, “Sixty-Minute Man” got steady play around the country.

But to truly be a bad motherfucker, a black man had to sing his own praises without hiding behind Dan Tucker or Jim Dandy. One of the first successful artists to toast himself on a commercial record was Ellas McDaniel, known as Bo Diddley, so named because as a boy he built and played his own homemade guitar, known among Mississippians as a diddley bow. Along with recording a boastful hit record in 1955 called “Bo Diddley,” he introduced the dozens on an even bigger hit four years later called “Say, Man,” and toasted himself on songs like “Who Do You Love?” (“I walked forty-seven miles of barbed wire, I use a cobra skin for a necktie, I got a brand new house on the roadside, made from rattlesnake hide”). Diddley based the song on the verse of an old toast called “The Great MacDaddy,” whose lines went: “I’ve got a tombstone disposition, graveyard mind. I know I’m a bad motherfucker, that’s why I don’t mind dyin’”; on vinyl Diddley re-imagined it as “Tombstone hand and graveyard mind, just twenty-two and I don’t mind dyin’” Not until the 1970s could a bad motherfucker put it out there loud and clear. His name was Rudy Ray Moore, and he called his superhuman alter ego Dolemite. But I’ve saved him for another chapter.

When gangsta rap burst on the scene in 1988, like a fusillade from an AK-47, with N.W.A.’s (Niggaz With Attitude) *Straight Outta Compton* album, the group rebottled the old toasts in new raps. One of their numbers, “Something Like That,” featured member Lorenzo Patterson introducing himself by name as MC Ren...

and for the street it’s Villain,  
and strapped with a gat, it’s more like Matt Dillon  
on *Gunsmoke*, but not a man of the law.  
I’m just the baddest motherfucker that you ever saw.

See, I peep and then I creep on a fool,  
get my blood pressure high but still stay cool.  
Dig a grave of a nigga lookin’ up to me,  
that really had the nerve that he could fuck with me...  
You know, it’s MC Ren kickin’ mucho ass.

Nowadays most black recording artists, along with more than a few sports heroes, present themselves to the world as bad, pimped-up, superhuman motherfuckers—or “sucker-motherfucker stoppers,” to quote N.W.A.’s Dr. Dre—possessing all the money, bling, and compliant young bitches that any man could wish for. To paraphrase the title of ex-basketball star Dennis Rodman’s autobiography, they’re “bad as they wanna be.” They’re standing at the center of a glitzed-out, blitzed-out celebrity culture that screams “Bad motherfucker!” even in the rare instance they don’t want to say it out loud themselves.

But despite their gains in show business, African Americans today are still relatively powerless in the greater scheme of things. Until the fundamentals change, the wounded pride of the young black male will continue to require the balm of the bad-motherfucker myth.