The Observer World

Eight miles of murder

It's America's most notorious highway, the road that divides black from white, and the backdrop for Eminem's hit movie. Last week his best man, the rapper Proof, was shot dead there. Paul Harris reports from Detroit

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Even by the low standards of Eight Mile Road, the Triple C bar was a seedy place to die. It is a squat one-storey building, windowless and dingy. The only hint at the nightclub inside is three white 'C's tacked to a dirty wall. It was here last week that local Detroit rapper 'Proof' died in a gun battle. It was a fight that ended another young black life in one of America's toughest cities. It also wrote one more bloody footnote to the growing legend of Eight Mile Road: a stretch of tarmac that divides both a city and a nation.
To many, Eight Mile is a familiar name - made famous by the semi-autobiographical movie of the same name by rapper Eminem. The film was Eminem's homage to the tough neighborhood of his youth, which had both nurtured his talents and proved a terrible place to grow up. Proof was part of that scene. Best man at Eminem's wedding, he was also a promising rapper in his own right as a member of the hit group D12.

But unlike the white rapper Eminem, the black Proof - real name DeShaun Holton - showed that most people do not escape Eight Mile. Despite his success and for all his riches, Proof died on the street that has become synonymous with all that is good and bad about rap music.

But Eight Mile means far more than another dead Detroit rapper, far more than one successful movie. The real significance of Eight Mile echoes far beyond Detroit. For this eight-lane road is a dividing line. It is where the city of Detroit ends and the suburbs begin. It carves off the rich from the poor, the black from the white, and the haves from the have-nots. It symbolizes the death of urban America and the white flight to the suburbs. It signifies the plight of the impoverished, left behind in dying cities that cannot look after them. It is both a physical barrier and a psychological one. Crossing Eight Mile Road is not as easy as just dodging the traffic.

Walking from one side of Eight Mile Road to the other is a jarring experience. To the south stretches Detroit, overwhelmingly black and poor. Businesses are shuttered. Some houses are burnt-out shells and abandoned cars stand on the streets. To the north lies the mostly white suburb of Oakland County. The shops are richer, the houses freshly painted and the neighborhoods have names such as Ferndale and Royal Oak. In between stretches Eight Mile Road, so called because of its distance from Detroit's river front. It is a strip of highway lined by pawn brokers, sex shops, topless bars, fast food restaurants and the sort of motels where guests stay either for an hour or three months. It is a haven for prostitutes and drug dealers. Even at 9am, just pulling up to the side of the road is enough to elicit the attention of a young man keen to sell drugs.

In Detroit the unemployment rate is 14.1 per cent, more than double the national average. Roughly a third of citizens live on or below the poverty line. The city is also now 82 per cent black. But across Eight Mile Road in Oakland County the demographic is suddenly reversed. These neighborhoods are 83 per cent white. The average household income on the north side of Eight Mile is double that of those living on the south side. The two neighborhoods rarely meet, despite being just a few minutes' walk apart. Residents on the north side have taken down the basketball hoops on their parks to discourage southern neighbors from coming over to play black America's favorite sport.

That decision goes to the core of the problem: race. Detroit - like many big American cities - is deeply racially divided between black and white. In the Fifties, more than 2 million people called Detroit home. Now that figure is fewer than 900,000. After race riots rocked the city in 1967 hundreds of thousands of whites moved away, unwilling to share their city with black Americans freed by the civil rights movements of the Sixties. They took with them the jobs and the money, condemning neighborhoods' to a long decline.

The second blow to Detroit was one of employment. The slow death of the American car industry has meant the death of much of working-class Detroit. Tens of thousands of jobs have disappeared in the past few decades, further eroding the city. Detroit has been gutted of its economic worth. It is dotted by gigantic and abandoned factories and host to roughly 13,000 homeless people. It is a place where residents will often burn 'problem' houses in their own neighborhoods' because the police will not tackle the crack dens themselves.

Yet to the north of Eight Mile lies a land of office parks and strip malls. It is a country of Starbucks and car parks and tidy lawns and white picket fences. 'This is just a great place to live. I know it's suburbia but that's where most people want to be,' says Ellen Francis, a 34-year-old mother of two as she walks along the pavements of Ferndale, about two miles north of Eight Mile. For Eight Mile has become not just a racial divide but also a class one. 'To many people Eminem was poor and he was from that Eight Mile neighborhood. So he may have been white, but he was still a "nigger",' says Carl Taylor, who is black and a sociologist at Michigan State University.

One of the few things to cross Eight Mile successfully has been rap music. In the shopping malls of northern suburbs such as Rochester Hills and Sterling Heights, white teenagers listen to the latest rap artists. They wear the baggy clothes and expensive trainers promoted by the hippest rap stars. Rap stars are heroes and the top of them all is Eminem.

When Eminem - real name Marshall Mathers - became a success he added further proof to the idea that rap music was a way out of poverty and crime. The mainstreaming of black urban culture into white suburban America has been one of the biggest, and most surprising, cultural phenomenons of the last two decades. It is also one of the most

lucrative. For many black kids it offered the promise of riches and a life free from crime. Nowhere has that been truer than in Detroit.

The city has experienced a flowering of talented rappers. Its nightlife may take place in seedy bars and clubs around Eight Mile or further into the city centre, but it is a vibrant scene. Rap music brought money and hope into some of the most deprived parts of the city. It also gave that area a fierce pride. Standing on a street corner just a few blocks south of Eight Mile, Jayson Jackson, 19 and out of work, believes rap music offers hope. 'Around here you want to be a rapper or a drug dealer. That's the choices,' he says.

Yet the popularity of rap music has also come with a social cost. The white kids copying the streetwise slang and mannerisms of poor urban blacks are generally still at high school. Most expect to go to college and eventually enter middle-class America. Suburbia still has a strong grip on them. Yet south of Eight Mile the violence and criminality so often glorified by rap music are lived for real.

The reaction to Proof's death shows that. Given the basic facts of the incident outside the Triple C bar, it would seem hard to glorify his violent death. But across the rap music scene, that is what is happening. A man whose last act was to shoot a US army veteran to death is being turned into a hero. For Taylor, conventional morality has reversed itself in rap culture. 'It is a mirror image. To be a thug in this culture is a good thing. A lot of things that mainstream society finds appalling, they see as good,' he says.

So, perhaps, it was with the events leading up to Proof's death. It was the early hours of the morning when the rapper got into a dispute with Keith Bender, a veteran of the first Gulf war. Bender, a medic, had been forced out of the army due to a heart condition. He was in the Triple C bar celebrating some good news about his condition. Then an argument broke out over a game of pool. During the course of the argument, Proof knocked Bender to the ground and shot him twice, one bullet hitting him in the head. As he stood over his bleeding victim, a friend of Bender's shot Proof dead. 'He is a poor candidate for deification,' thundered an editorial in the Detroit News

But deified he has been - and to no one's surprise. For violence and crime permeate every aspect of modern rap music. Having its stars die or become involved in gunfights is commonplace. Nor is it bad for business. Proof's death was foretold in the music video for the Eminem song 'Toy Soldiers'. In the video Eminem is seen pacing hospital corridors as doctors struggle to save Proof's life after he has been shot. The effort fails and the video then goes on to show Proof's funeral. Now life has imitated art.

Many lament the culture that celebrates deaths like this. Taylor has coined the phrase 'Third City' to describe places like Detroit. Third Cities are places that have been abandoned by mainstream America, where the drug trade has become the mainstay of the economy. 'You know it used to be companies like Chrysler and Ford that would provide the support system in Detroit. Now in some places all that is done by the drugs business,'

he said. Taylor believes the rest of America has ceased to care. While rap's themes and fashions have become main stream, the social problems that created it have been ignored.

Last week, as the flowers on Proof's impromptu shrine already began to wilt in an early burst of spring sunshine, there were hundreds of written messages of support. Many celebrated a lifestyle of drugs and violence. 'Proof, I will smoke one for you,' wrote one man signing himself as Dead Ren. Another declared: 'Eight Mile. Detroit for life!' Given the context, that sounded like a prison sentence: a proud boast from a life lived behind invisible bars.