

CUBIC

With his stripper-makes-good drama, 'The Players Club,' Ice Cube jump-cuts from gangsta rapper to Hollywood auteur



FEAT

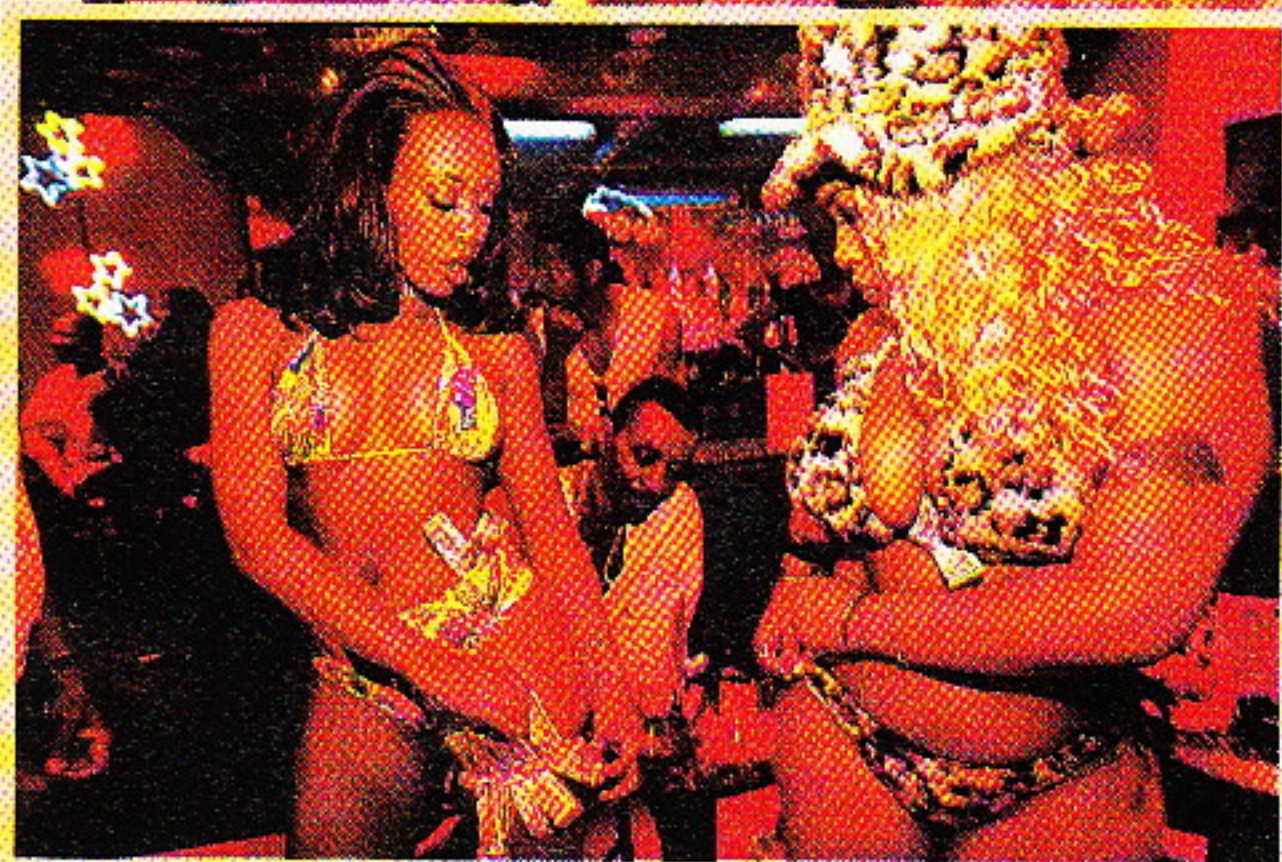
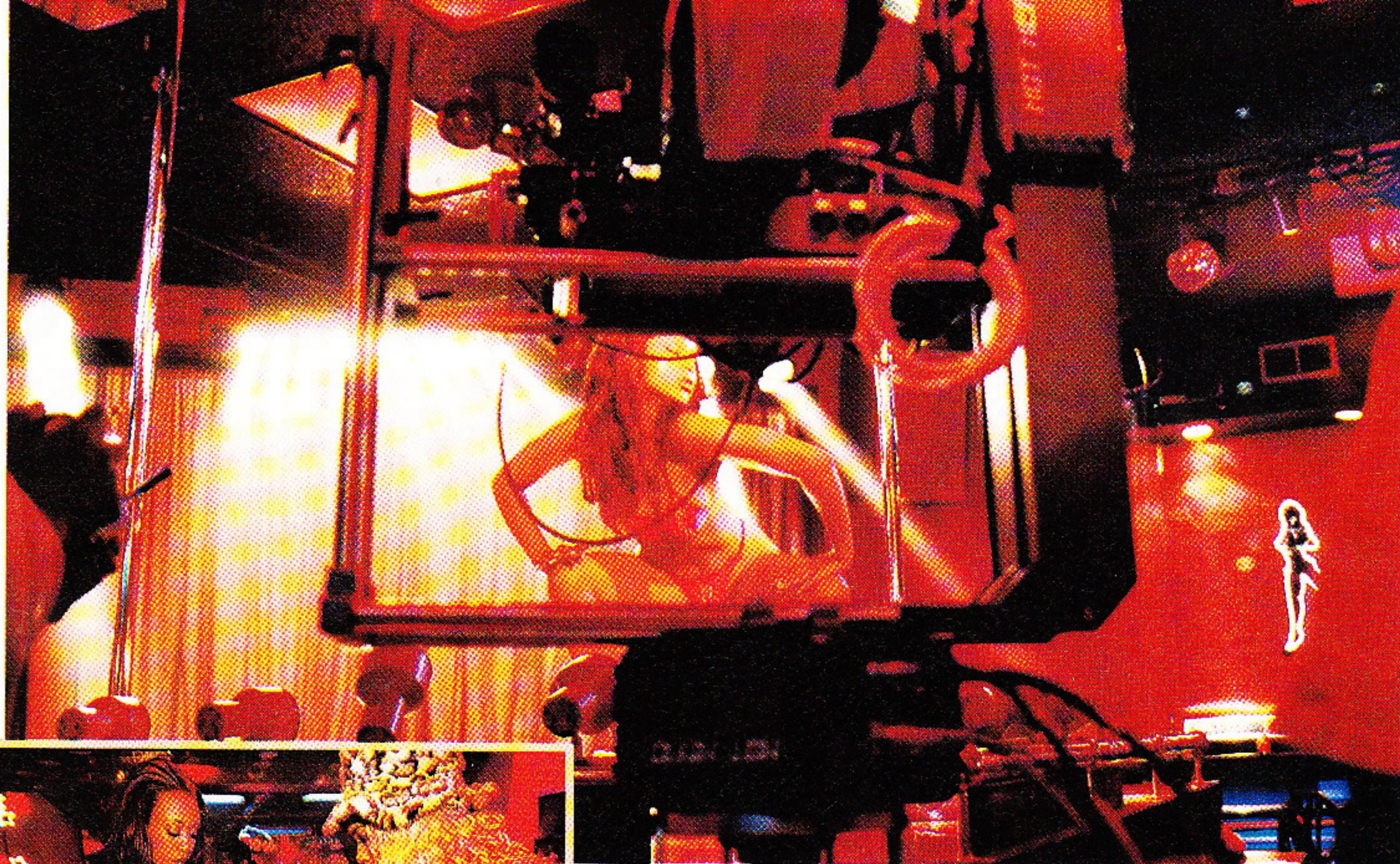
BY NANCY JO SALES

ICE CUBE WATCHES THE WOMAN DANCE. She has a foot-high Diana Ross wig on her head and a crotch-level, pink baby-doll dress on her back, but something cold—icy—around the eyes says, Oh yeah? She'll never forget who she is . . . and she'll never stop thinking she can beat your ass.

"A five, six, seven, eight—" The choreographer named Fatima, with a midriff like the top of a six-pack and skinny, hip-length dreads, is counting out beats for Lisa Raye, the actress playing Diamond, the leading lady of *The Players Club*. It's Ice Cube's movie; he wrote it, he's directing and coproducing, and he also has a small onscreen role. This is the film that will tell whether Cube—rapper, actor, one-time annoyance to the FBI ("Fuck tha Police")—will make it into the Hollywood players' club. Nowadays, that's where he wants to be.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY LARA JO REGAN

GARRETT VERNER



FORTUNE AND MEN'S EYES: Actress Lisa Raye (above and left, comparing cash tips with a fellow dancer) rehearses her routine. "Cube thinks very visually," director John Singleton says. "And he knows how to tell a story from the type of music he does."

From inside a warehouse in the San Fernando Valley, the set of *The Players Club* feels like a descent into a particular part of hell—dive hell—all neon signs of nude figures of girls, dirty glasses of whiskey and crumpled cocktail napkins, bodacious strippers plucked from real life, voguing in the aisles through red light and smoke.

Frozen in concentration, Ice Cube is watching as Lisa Raye threatens to undress. This is the moment when Diamond, the *Players Club* newcomer, will show all the veteran strippers and seen-it-all regulars that she can make it in this lousy business, that she can make them want to stuff money in her pants.

Raye tugs down the top of her pink nightie. Actress and director have the same look on their faces—a kind of dare. . . .

Cube's trademark diamond glitters in his left ear. He has the stare of a bull.

AND THE VOICE OF a bullhorn. "We need to shoot!" Rehearsal is over, and the strippers are hurrying around in go-go boots, platforms, and stilettos, all a-jiggle, a

blur of feather boas and thongs and fake jungle fur. Cube, in basic black—T-shirt, jeans, Converse high-tops—and sporting a Vandyke beard, is poised in the middle of the mayhem, absolutely still, despite the fact that he's bellowing.

"We need to *absolutely, positively shoot!*"

At 28, he looks leaner and, if possible, meaner than the pudgy 21-year-old who debuted on the screen as Doughboy, the doomed thug in John Singleton's South Central masterpiece, *Boyz n the Hood*. By premiere time, Cube had already been famous, even infamous, for a good two years as the booming, staccato voice in the original so-called gangsta rap group, N.W.A, and as a solo artist. Today, his voice still has the unmistakable note of confrontation: "What's the problem?"

But his image has softened since his days of predicting urban Armageddon (presciently enough, on his album *Death Certificate*, released just months before the Rodney King verdict and the L.A. riots). Subsequent films, such as the cult classic *Friday*—which he cowrote and starred in, riffing on getting high 'n the 'hood—showed a more humorous, even silly, side to Cube. His role in last year's *Anaconda* was just plain silly, in keeping with the movie, a high-gloss horror flick that became a hit. "It was corny," Cube says. "I did

it because I got to kill the snake and because I want to expand my audience."

Cube's growing entanglement with Hollywood, or at least its normal "corny" fare, such as the misguided *Dangerous Ground* with Elizabeth Hurley, has made him suspect among hip-hop's more hard-core fans. Last year, D.J. Pooh and Kam took Cube to task in the song "Whoop! Whoop!," accusing him of being fake. (*Vibe* called it the "Dis of the Year," adding, "The Ice Cube melteth.") But you could easily attribute it to "player-hating": Five solo Cube CDs have gone platinum.

Anyway, he chooses to ignore the flak. "People who'd say I lost a step or whatever would be kind of blind to the big picture," he says and smiles. "They mistake edge for reality. But edge only is not reality. My life has all different things going on."

Like getting *The Players Club* made. New Line Cinema came up with \$5 million for the film, and it has been a squeeze, with eight actors (including Jamie Foxx, *Def Comedy Jam*'s Bernie Mac, and *Bagdad Cafe*'s Monica Calhoun) and 50 extras, as well as an explosion (it's no big surprise that the club goes kablooy at the end) that was televised on cable. "We had [special effects expert] John Hartigan, a real big dude," Cube says. "It looked really good, man. I thought it was gonna be like a little *poof*."

FOXX POPULI: Jamie Foxx, who plays a deejay (right), is an old Cube pal. "You know, he used to be a ballet dancer, back in the day," Foxx jokes.

But the wear and tear of six weeks of shooting on short money shows on Cube's face. "Guys who sit in executive positions make a lot of crazy decisions," Cube says. "They turn down a lot of movies that can be done for a small amount of money and make a lot." He complains from experience: *Friday*, which was made with New Line for \$2.3 million, has taken in \$30 million with video sales. "Hollywood has it sewed up," Cube says, shrugging. "With a record, you could put it out yourself and still be on a major level. But in the movie business that road won't happen. At some point you're gonna have to attach on to this machine."

A makeup woman bustles around with a water bottle. "Dancers should be sweated down, everybody real sweaty!" Cube commands. The Players Club men, huddled at tables stageside, screw up their faces for the spritz. They're a motley assemblage in their wide lapels and shimmery shirts, Afros and conked hair—*The Cotton Club* meets *Shaft*, though the movie is set in the '90s.

Cube looks over the men impatiently and frowns, remarking aside to a wardrobe person, "We need to find some cooler-looking dudes!" Now the makeup woman goes for the strippers, but here she encounters resistance: "If I look any wetter," says one, "they'll be wondering what I been doing!" They laugh.

The women are fierce. Many were found in dance clubs in L.A. Chrystale Wilson, who plays the film's villainess, Ronnie, was working in a law firm by day and stripping by night to raise money to buy a house when she auditioned.

Wilson swings back a lock of platinum wig hair with her three-inch nails. Last night, she says, Cube was directing her in a scene and "we both totally overlooked the fact that I was topless. I really am a very tall woman, and I have on these six-inch heels, and so I'm standing there six-foot-two, and he's not a very tall guy, so . . ." The image complete, she smiles. "You get so caught up in what you're doing."

THERE'S A 'NO TOUCHING' sign posted in the Players Club. In the strippers' locker room, a sign says, IF U BORROW IT, PUT IT BACK OR THAT'S YOUR ASS!!!!

Jamie Foxx is wandering by, decked out in a slick acetate shirt and wide-brimmed cap; he's playing Blue, the Players Club deejay. To show what it's like to be directed by Cube, he does a deep-voiced imitation: "Right here, you mad! . . . Right here, you happy! Action!"



"I do so much in the entertainment business," says Cube. "When I'm stressed out, it's just like a normal thing."

Foxx shakes his head with affection, watching the director barking at the troops. "I wish that people could see this side of Ice Cube," he says. "The person who feels shots and sees scenes and puts it all together. It would offset what he does in the music."

"It's time to go, time to go!" Cube shouts. Malik Sayeed, his director of photography (*Clockers*, *Girl 6*), mans the camera inside the doors of the club set. Cube sits just outside, on a folding chair, watching the monitor like a father outside a delivery room. The voice of R. Kelly wafts longingly over the set: "Seems like you're ready. . ." It's a strange choice for a strip scene, a languid, almost mournful song. But Cube has his ideas about how it's all going to come together. "Slow it down!" he says.

The music starts again. On the monitor Lisa Raye comes out. A sweeping shot travels toward her slowly, as if in a trance, then goes fuzzy on the image of a disco ball. "That's too *Soul Train*," Cube says. Now Raye slides down the pole on the Plexiglas stage and, squatting at the bottom, bumps her behind, once leisurely, then three times fast. "Seems like you're ready," R. Kelly sings. Now she's on her knees, crawling toward the camera, her gaze steady and cold, her breasts swinging slightly, nails grabbing at the ground. . . .

"That's the shit," whispers Cube. He

stares into the monitor, watching her dance. This isn't *Showgirls*. This is hot. He springs out of his chair and walks off, unable to contain himself any longer. He thrusts an index finger in the air. "That's dope!"

TODAY WAS A good day," goes one of Cube's most memorable lines from rap, "I didn't even have to use my AK. . ."

It's "lunch," about 2 A.M.

The cast is lining up for

gumbo, rice, and corn bread, served by a woman in a checked playsuit whom everyone calls Mom. Many of the crew are wearing the red Players Club T-shirt, which bears the motto MAKE THE MONEY, DON'T LET THE MONEY MAKE YOU. Most—80 percent—are African-American; this is the first time in 25 years, claims Pat Charbonnet, one of the film's coproducers, that so many African-American Teamsters have worked together on a movie. "It feels really good," Charbonnet says. "You hear about how most of us aren't working and collecting government cheese, but that's not what I'm seeing here."

In his trailer, Cube sits back on a tweed couch, briefly resting, storing up energy for the next scene. "Some days directing is overwhelming," he says, "until you have to just physically sit down and build up enough . . . not courage but strength to go back and battle that tidal wave. But I do so much in the entertainment business—I make music, I produce, I direct, I act—so, to me, when I'm stressed out, it's just like a normal thing."

It was while he was on the road performing music, in fact, that Cube went into some strip joints with some buddies and got the notion of writing a movie about dancers. "It was a long time ago, before *Showgirls* or *Striptease* came out," he says. "Any girl like that who danced was just slightly different than anyone I knew. They tell you exactly what's on their mind. It seems like everybody wants to be like them—a person who knows the real from the fake. Their lifestyle makes them that way."

He could almost be talking about himself. O'Shea Jackson, a.k.a. Ice Cube, grew up as one of the Boyz N the Hood. "I think that movie gave people insight into how we grew up. I come from South Central L.A. But I went to school at Taft in the Valley, so I got kind of, like, both worlds every day."

One thing that tied the two worlds together was movies. "That was one of my favorite things to do as a kid," Cube says. "Like seventh, eighth grade, me and my friends went to movies like (Continued on page 128)

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Meatballs, *Friday the 13th*, *Jaws*—you know what I'm saying?" And then in 1985, when he was sixteen, he went to see the rapper flick *Krush Groove*. "It was the first time I saw black kids my age on the screen doing anything that was real. Until then I felt a thousand miles away from that world. But then I said, 'Okay, that's something maybe I could do.'"

When *Boyz N the Hood* came out, Cube's acting abilities were heralded in nearly every review, but he was already thinking about directing. Before *The Players Club* Cube directed thirteen videos, including ones for Prince and Color Me Badd. In preparation for *The Players Club*, he viewed a lot of Scorsese and *A Clockwork Orange* with his mentor of sorts, John Singleton.

"For years I've been telling him to direct a film," says Singleton, who's been hanging out, off and on, on the set. (*The Players Club* has attracted a Who's Who of celebrity fans—Snoop Doggy Dogg, Cuba Gooding, Jr.) "This will be a whole new career for him. There are so many aspects of him people don't know about," Singleton says.

Cube's type of music has often been accused of being sexist, and it will be interesting to see how critics react to a gangsta rapper making a movie about a young mother who strips and puts herself through college. "It's not a raunchy movie," Cube says. "I want to really take you into a strip club and see what some girls have to go through to make a decent living. Once you get into that world, you can either get sucked down into the bowels of it or you can learn from it and use it."

Charbonnet, who is Cube's partner at Ghetto Bird Productions, sees an automatic affinity between the director and his subject matter. "When I was first reading the script," she says, "I related to it that way, as that rebel without a pause. I've been with Cube since the inception of his career. I always felt that directing would be a natural for him. He's walking the walk and talking the talk, and it's not an invention, and it's not manufactured."

"LUNCH" IS OVER. Cube is pacing up and down. The inner bullhorn comes out. "Let's go!" He takes his director's chair.

The Players Club, with its intended grittiness, won't be an easy sell in Middle America. Cube is content to make a "small film"—for now. But some day, he says, "I want to run a

studio. Why not? I think I could run one better than some of these other studios are being run. They're wasting money on uninteresting topics, uninteresting people making the same kinds of movies. I think people are getting tired of that." He puts on a pair of headphones. "Hollywood has been square for a long time. Through the music, the world has become more accepting of a person of my point of view, because it's alive, alive to the world. Now we have a chance to put our point of view up on the screen. Action!"

Through the music, indeed. On the drive back to west L.A. in a chunky white rental car, the hip-hop station on the radio—lo and behold—starts playing Ice Cube. He's rapping about driving along a highway. It's from the *Predator* album, the one that came out after L.A. exploded in 1992. In the song, Cube's looking up in his mirror—he's being followed by police. They stop him and order him out of the car. They put him in a choke hold, hit him with a billy club, burn him with a Tazer.

"Goddamn y'all," he asks, over and over again, "who got the camera?"

"Who got the camera?" ■

Nancy Jo Sales is a contributing editor at New York magazine.



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