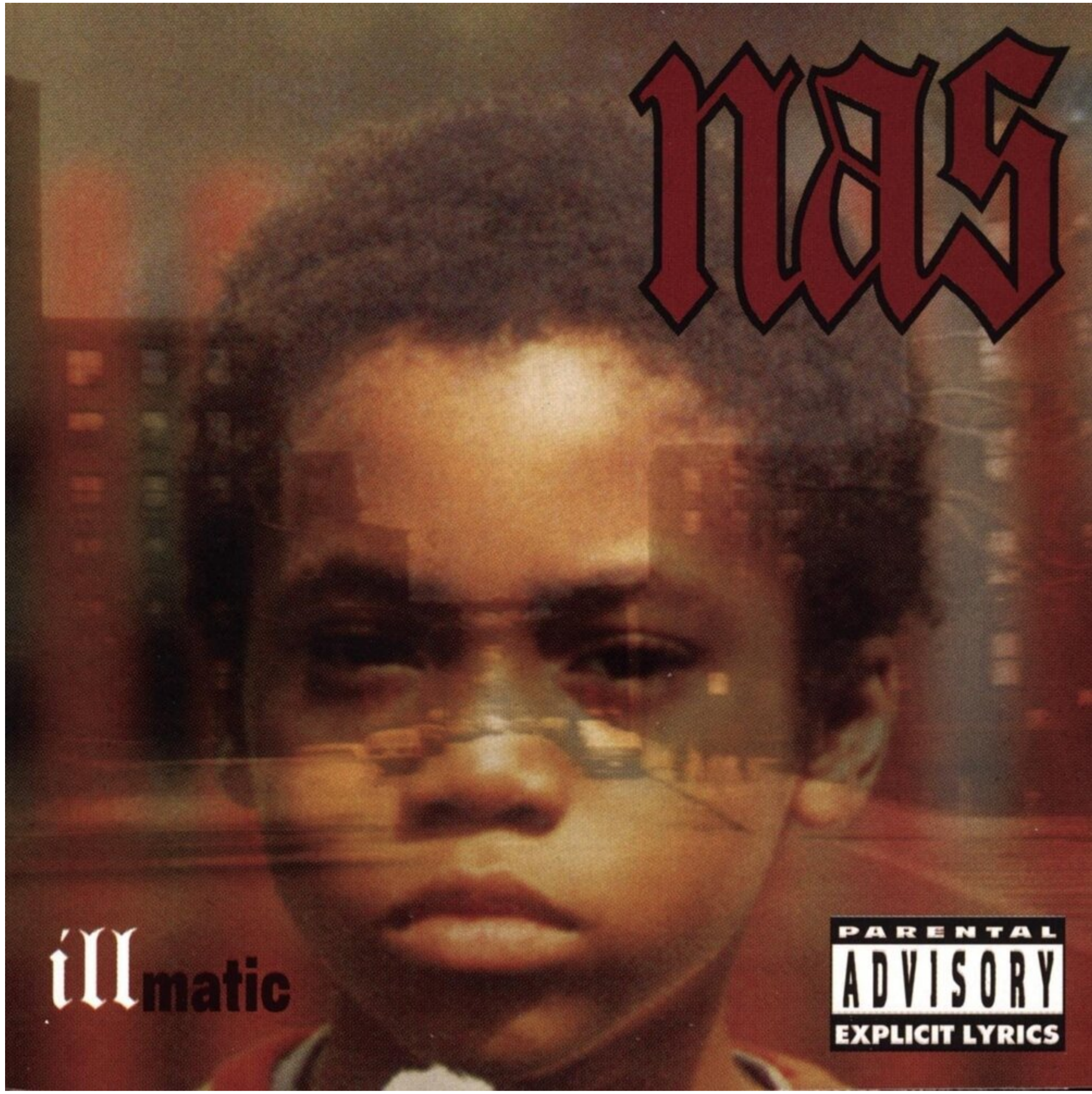


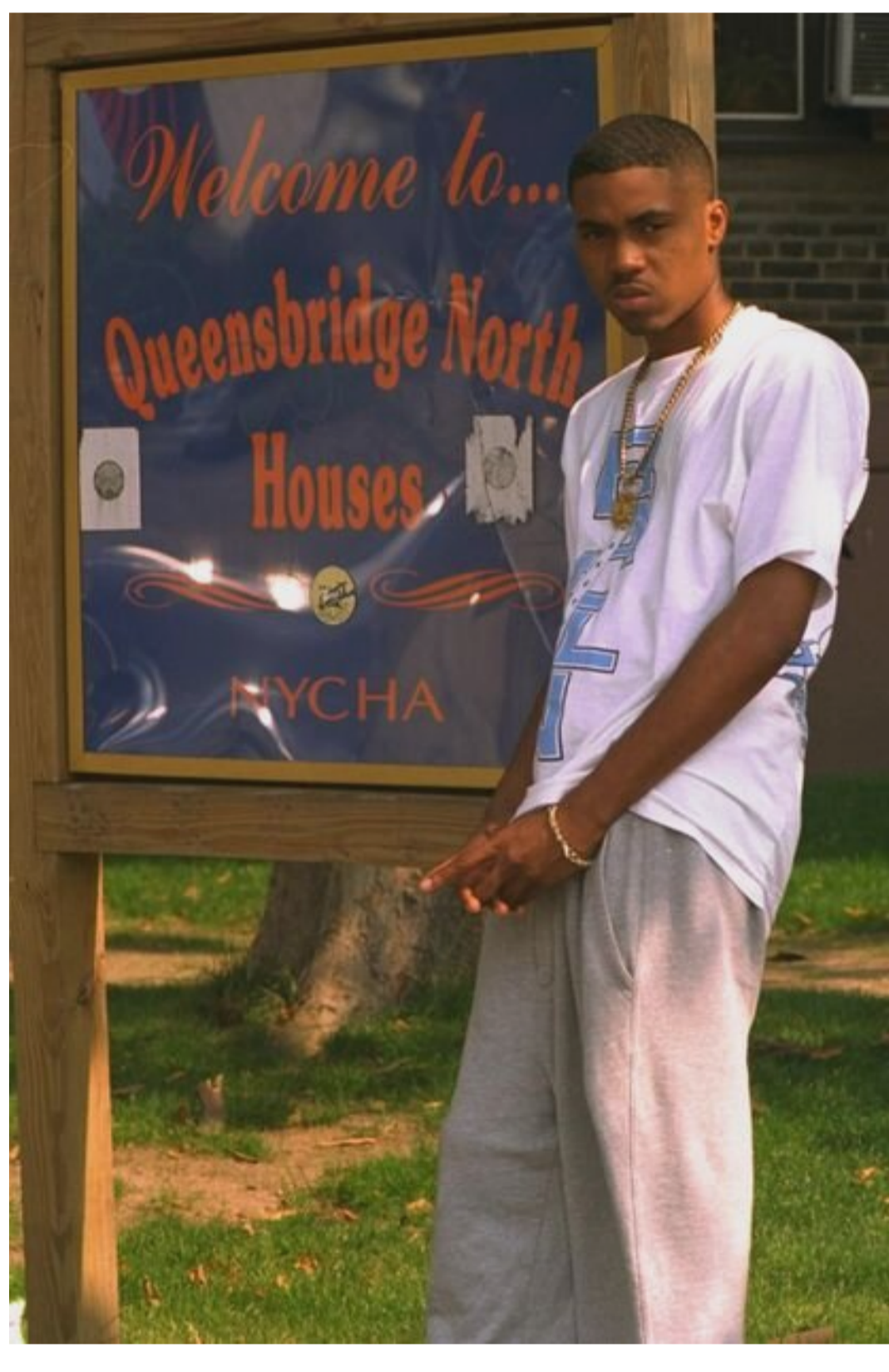
# The Making of Nas' Illmatic

Written By Manahil Mumim



The hip-hop album that Nas' undisputed reputation is built on, 'Illmatic' is one of the few albums that served as both a debut project and became the pinnacle of an artist's career. Released in 1994, the rich lyrics and strong production still hold value and continue to influence the genre 27 years later.

Set to the backdrop of the Queensbridge Houses in New York, the largest and oldest housing projects in America, Nas weaves the themes that characterised his adolescence such as violence, race and incarceration into the 10 track album. While referencing life experiences in lyrics was and is still conventional in hip-hop, Nas left no stone unturned and covered the smallest of details of growing up in Queensbridge. Intending to spotlight the inner-city narrative of the East coast, Nas gave the world "What the streets felt like, sounded like, and tasted like". Using metaphoric word play and gritty lyricism, 'Illmatic' carries the listener right to Queensbridge -- the heart of the album.

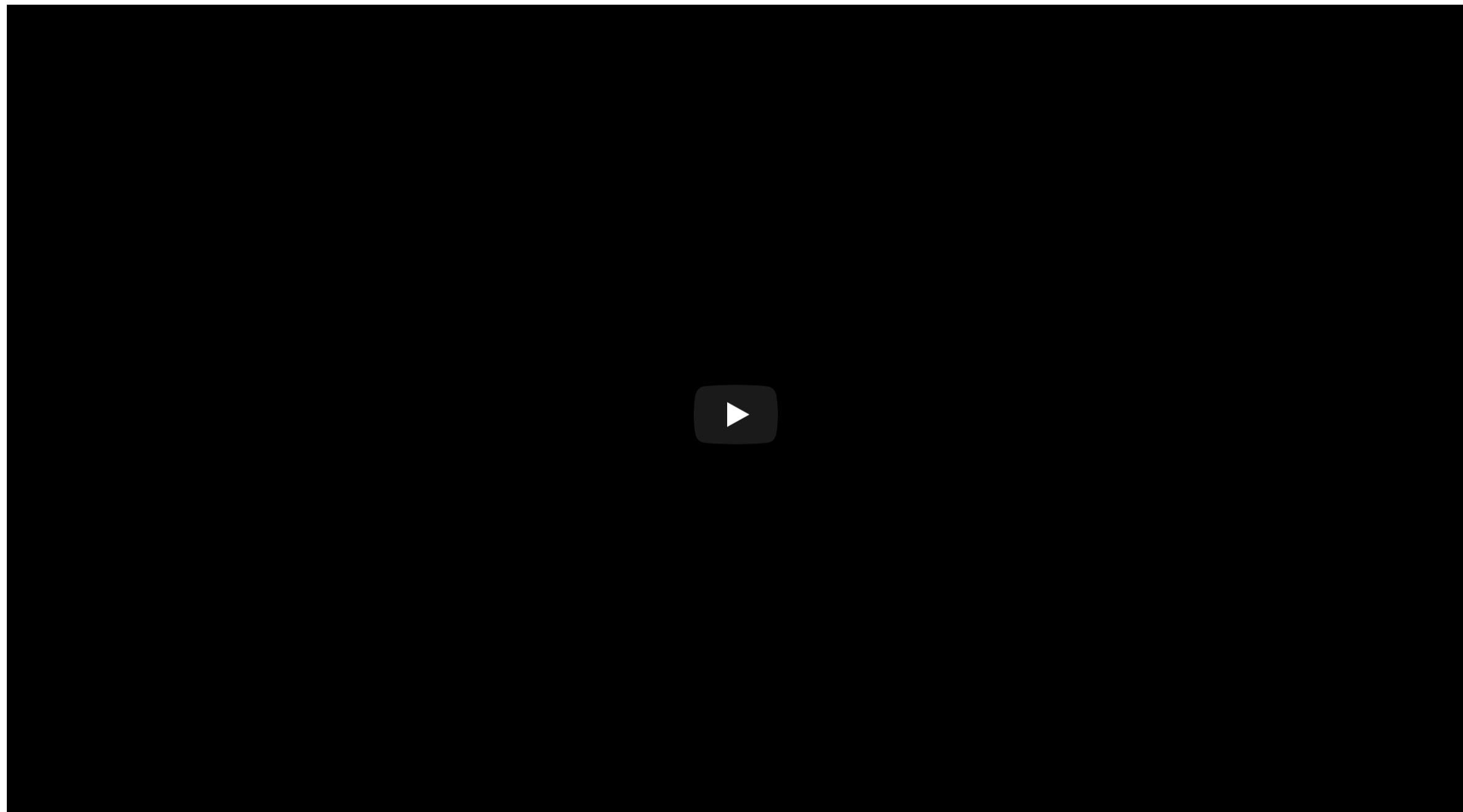


While the early '90s was a strong era for hip-hop in the West coast, the genre was still considered young. Far different from the commercialisation and hyper-consumption seen today, artists took years to complete projects and consumers took months to absorb its content. For Nas, 'Illmatic' was no different – "I realised, writing the first album, you've been writing it all your life until that point. So I'd been writing it since I was 9 years old, in a way".

His interest in the arts paired with advice from his musical-heritage father, Olu Dara, led him to drop out of school in the eighth grade. Witnessing the crack epidemic and violence in a post-Reagan era, music became a form of escapism and expression for Nas as a young teen. Frequenting the Queensbridge park jams, he found himself on stage one day as an MC – "Nasty Nas" – for Main Source, rapping a track titled "Live at the Barbeque". The infamous line "When I was 12, I went to jail for snuffing Jesus" caught just about every music mogul's attention.

That appearance helped Nas fall favourably into the hands of Faith Newman, A&R executive at Columbia Records. Introduced to her by MC Serch, Newman had long been searching for Nas, adamant on signing him the moment she heard his rhymes. Signed to Columbia at the age of 18, Nas went straight to work on 'Illmatic' with a team of the best rap producers including Large Professor, L.E.S., and Q-Tip. As the "new guy" in the industry, he pushed a boundary by asking for a lineup of the greatest producers – their acceptance proving their faith in his talent.

Taking over two years to produce, the album was still rushed to market as thousands of copies were being produced. The Source had run a two-page spread giving 'Illmatic' their illustrious 5 mics, the first project to receive such an esteemed review in two years. Despite The Source being the hip-hop bible at the time and the overwhelming excitement surrounding 'Illmatic', it performed poorly on the market, only reaching Gold certification after two years.



An evocative soundscape with lyrics that overwhelmingly captivate the listener, at its core 'Illmatic' is a poetic recount of Nas' early life in New York. Named after a close friend from Queensbridge, the album was dedicated to "Illmatic Ice" who had then been serving time in jail. Photographed on the cover of 'Illmatic' is a faded image of the Queensbridge Houses with a young Nas in the foreground, capturing the multi-layered aspect of the album and the interconnectivity between person and place. Still recognised as one of the greatest hip-hop albums of all time, 'Illmatic' was recently inducted into the Library of Congress for preservation for its widely copied and influential technique.



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