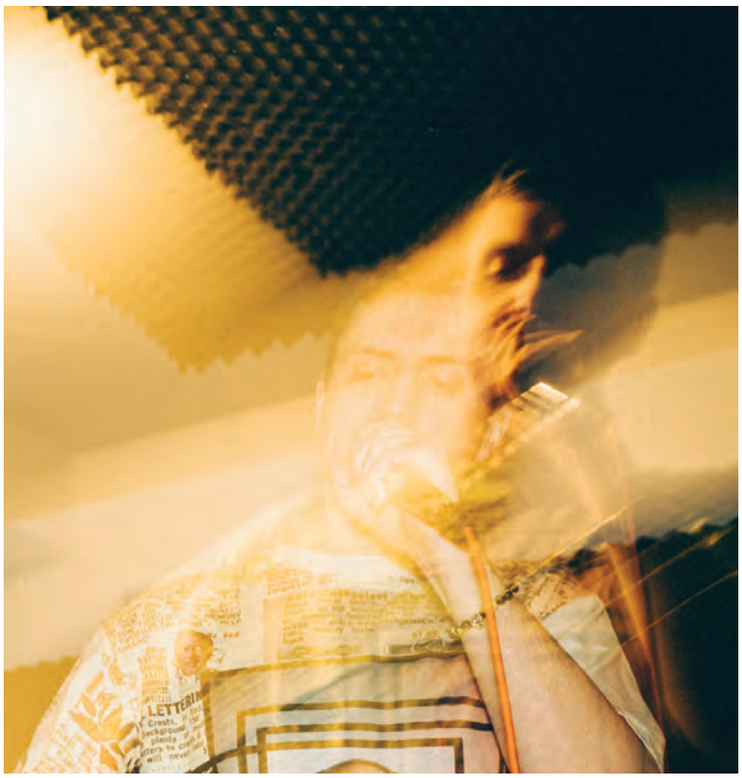
Chris Steele and Chavo Trejo rehearse music in a Denver studio.



THE ARTIST AND THE ANARCHIST

CHRIS STEELE IS A RAP ARTIST, WRITER, RESEARCHER AND TEACHER. HE'S ALSO THE SAME KID FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD, TRYING TO ANSWER LIFELONG QUESTIONS.

CHRIS STEELE COULDN'T SIT IDLE. He'd grown up in the Regis neighborhood only a block south of campus. Some 20 years ago, the neighborhood was different.

It was gritty but dripped with culture and character. Gentrification hadn't become a lazy word thrown around by those trying to stay woke. Houses weren't being razed for skinny apartment buildings marketed as "Just miles from downtown!" Brown Berets kept peace and the Chicano movement was alive. Gangs had corners and it meant something to be from the Northside or the Westside. Sometimes it wasn't good to be from either.

The sounds of music and rap battles filled the weekend nights at Winchell's Donuts and Hi Performance Car Wash on Federal. The hip hop collective Zulu Nation would make unannounced stops at Sloan's Lake.

Basketball games at the Boys and Girls Club on 39th and King Street pitted neighborhood against neighborhood. The score on the court often trickled into parking lot fights.

And by 13, Steele, RC '11 and CPS '14, had seen it all — the poverty, the drugs and the tough areas of his neighborhood. He viewed Regis as a fortress of privilege. He broke into the Field House to play basketball and stole stuff from the K-Mart, before the store was torn down to become Regis' parking lot 6. He'd seen his brother kicked out of high school and mixed up with gangs.

WORDS: *Luke Graham* IMAGES: *Brett Stakelin*

"HE WAS DIFFERENT THAN MOST REGIS STUDENTS. HE SAW AND EXPERIENCED THE WORLD IN ANOTHER LIGHT. EVERYONE WHO HAS KNOWN CHRIS, KNOWS HOW UNIQUE HE IS."

It wasn't until he witnessed a stabbing in Berkeley Park that things began to change.

"That was it," he said. "We decided to bring people together. We organized."

A WAY TOWARD EDUCATION

The Chris Steele of today is the American dream.

He's the story of the kid who came from nothing and made himself into something. Growing up, he saw poor people of all ethnicities living a few blocks from Regis and wondered why and how they got there. He saw those in power limiting the opportunities of his neighbors and wondered what that meant.

He wondered then about his place in it all.

Those questions drove Steele, now 34, to become a sought-after writer and researcher. His childhood experiences drive his music, and his early inquiries continue to inform his unique thought.

Steele already has co-published articles with noted social critic and philosopher Noam Chomsky and has conducted research for filmmaker and author T.R. Reid, who lives in Denver. His queries supplied the lyrics for his eight hip-hop albums. They gave him the backbone for producing music for Common and touring with Talib Kweli. His inquisitiveness helped him earn a pair of degrees from Regis.

At his core, Steele remains the same working-class kid from the Regis neighborhood who's trying to answer these lifelong, burning questions. He has the restless heart of an anarchist, writer and rapper who wants to document a revolution, one where the voiceless roar.

"I think musically or writing, what I'm trying to do is expose B.S.," he said.

It almost didn't happen. After high school, Steele worked for a trucking company at a dock, until one day he ran into a friend who was a Regis landscaper. There was an opening.

He applied for and got the job. With employee-tuition benefits — where employees can study at a discounted rate — Steele found himself enrolled at the University and working on his bachelor's degree. He worked for three years in Physical Plant before transferring to the library where he worked the front desk. Eventually he earned a master's in history and politics and began teaching at Regis. He brought his unique perspective into the classroom.

"The material I taught him he used to turn into raps," said James Walsh, who was one of the first professors at Regis who taught Steele. "You could tell he was from this old North Denver working class community. He was different than most Regis students. He saw and experienced the world in another light. Everyone who has known Chris, knows how unique he is."

DO IT YOURSELF

The single-minded purpose and determination that propelled Steele to stand at a classroom podium at Regis was kindled as a street kid. He also had a fierce sense of purpose and desire to make the world around him better.

But back when he was 13, Steele was reeling. He'd seen someone stabbed at Berkeley Park — a place he considered sacred. He'd witnessed what violence had done to his neighborhood and believed only two things brought people together: hip-hop and basketball. He wanted to do something about it.

So Steele walked north to Regis Boulevard, took a left and walked down to the pay phone at the convenience store at the corner of 50th and Lowell Boulevard.

Armed with 1-800 numbers from the back of the basketball publication Slam Magazine and hip-hop magazines Spin, XXL and The Source, Steele started dialing.

He dialed and dialed and dialed.

"I knew those numbers were free to call," he said.

He planned to set up a basketball tournament and hip-hop show in Berkeley Park. He convinced the footwear company AND1 to deliver boxes of shirts to his parents' doorstep. Wanna Battle Records in Cincinnati, Ohio, agreed to sponsor.

"If the city wasn't going to help us put it on," Steele said, "I figured, OK, let's do it on our own."

After the tournament, Wanna Battle Records came through town and invited Steele to watch several of their rappers perform in downtown Denver. He found himself in the company of rappers like Main Flow and the militant hip-hop duo Dead Prez.

The teenaged Steele reveled in the intersection of hip hop and activism, politics and race, and it piqued his growing belief in anarchy.

Suddenly, Dead Prez called him on stage to rap.

"That," he said, "that right there blew my mind."

ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES

He was in college when the financial crisis cost his parents their home. Steele joined the Occupy Denver movement, which called itself a leaderless resistance movement and believed greed and corruption by "the top 1 percent" had caused the 2008 economic collapse. While working on his bachelor's degree, he published articles that examined large corporations. He soon became involved in efforts to stop what were known as SLAPP or "strategic lawsuits against public participation," which were intended to discourage protests through excessive litigation. The SLAPP theory held that protesters wouldn't want to pay to defend themselves in court.

"I pissed off a lot of people," he said. "I must have been doing something right."

Occupy Denver encouraged his outlook and pressed Steele to seek solutions. He's passionate about those who don't have a voice. He raps and writes about injustice, illegal occupations, immigration, racism, white supremacy, patriarchy, colonization and giving the power back to people. He sees his place as an organizer, a voice for those who didn't grow up privileged. He's starting to research a book on historical anarchy uprisings, and he's co-authoring a book about the Common Ground Collective, a grassroots group formed by former Black Panthers and anarchists. They rebuilt communities that were devastated by 2005's Hurricane Katrina.

Steele continues to make music and has talked with Talib Kweli about signing with the Brooklyn rapper's label. He volunteers at schools across the metro area, teaching beat poetry as a way of expressing feelings. He continues to teach at various high schools and community colleges and search for answers to those questions he first encountered in his neighborhood.

"Chris is so f------ talented," said rapper Tim "Sole" Holland, who has collaborated with Steele on multiple projects. "His podcast is growing, his rap career is growing, there is a line for him to be a professor that's growing. His résumé as a published writer is growing. He's becoming so influential. I wouldn't be surprised if he continues on these big rap tours, or if you find him regularly published.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he ends up as a professor," Holland said. "He's so complex that he could do whatever he wants."

Yet Steele mainly sees himself as the kid from the Regis neighborhood.

"I guess I've learned it doesn't matter where you're from," Steele said. "I've really started to think about what it means to create. Love is something you do now that you may not see the benefits from. But future generations may benefit from this album or this writing. When it comes down to it, that's really what love is."

Cover art of Chris Steele's seventh album created by artist **Seth Tobocman**. Steele, who goes by the rap name *Time*, released this in 2016.