

# Enter the Babylon System

*Unpacking Gun Culture from  
Samuel Colt to 50 Cent*

RODRIGO BASCUÑÁN &  
CHRISTIAN PEARCE



VINTAGE CANADA

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## PRAISE FOR

### ENTER THE BABYLON SYSTEM



“A passionate and illuminating discussion of the links (or lack thereof) between hip-hop music and gun culture. ... Bascuñán and Pearce, adamant believers in hip-hop’s positive ‘political and cultural voice,’ are also honest and sincere reporters.”

—Macleans.ca

“A well researched, easily navigated tome.”

—*Toronto Star*

“Bascuñán and Pearce have used their industry credentials to gain access to some of the major players in the multi-billion dollar hip-hop industry and the multi-billion dollar gun industry. Their thoroughly researched book looks at gun culture from all angles: economic, cultural and political.”

—*The Gazette* (Montreal)

“*Enter the Babylon System* is engaging and straightforward, written in a fast-paced, journalistic style. The book is well researched, with enough sources and statistics to make a point without bogging the reader down. Best of all, Bascuñán and Pearce seem to really have the inside story on gun culture, particularly in hip-hop.”

—*Quill & Quire*

“*Enter the Babylon System* navigates the small-arms industry’s twisting corridors, delving into gun design, manufacturing, marketing, lobbying and legislation along the way.”

—CBC.ca

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# **ENTER THE BABYLON SYSTEM**

**UNPACKING GUN CULTURE  
FROM SAMUEL COLT TO 50 CENT**

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**INTRODUCTION**

**WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE BABYLON SYSTEM**

**FIRST CHAMBER**

**THE TRADE OF THE TOOLS**

Para-noid

Blowing Smoke

Original Blast Masters

Stock Up

Plastic Hammers

Big Bird

Junk in the Trunk

Crime Sprays

From Russia with Slugs

Black Rifles

Ready to Diemaco

**SECOND CHAMBER**

**LOOSE CANNONS**

Hit Factories

Robbin' Steel

Shop 'til They Drop

Gun for the Border

Critical Mass

Banded About

Terror Risks

If the Suit Fits

UNRA

Twisting Arms

Where the Tools Rule

## THIRD CHAMBER

### **THE PULL OF THE TRIGGER**

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Killin' 'em Softly

Rat-a-tat-tat

Under Pressure

'Wood Burners

Licence to Frag

Passed the Gat

Things Done Changed

## FOURTH CHAMBER

### **BARRELS OF DESTRUCTION**

Wild Hoods

Heat Nutz

The Other 'cide

Gunfire Drill

Shots Happen

Country Fire

All-Points Bullet-in

Shell Shock

Picking Up the Pieces

Guns, Gangs and God

## CONCLUSION

### **UNLOADING**

Acknowledgments

Source Notes



INTRODUCTION  
**WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY  
OF THE BABYLON SYSTEM**

**THE COPS DON'T KNOW** where the killer came from, or where it's gone since. Maybe it sits at the bottom of some river running beneath a bridge, or perhaps police will find it only after it has killed again. All we know is that it found its way into the hands of a young man with a calloused heart and a fragile ego, that in one moment, a flash really, that young man used it to take from this world forever a son, a brother, a mentor and a best friend. A soulmate.

On December 13, 2003, Clayton Kempton Howard was shot once in the head outside the Toronto apartment he shared with his mother, Joan, and younger brother, Kareem. He died instantly, at the age of twenty-four.

Kempton Howard was a lover of hip-hop. For those within the culture, hip-hop is much more than just music. It is a way of life, the practice of being yourself. And in so many ways, Kempton's self projected greatness. Taiwo Bah can tell you. He is that soulmate. "I've never known anyone that's into music as much as he was," Tai said. "For him, it's a life, it's a whole culture to it. He embodied hip-hop."

When we first met Taiwo face to face in the summer of 2004, it was at Joan Howard's new house. The city had assisted in an expeditious move to a nice townhouse at the end of a tree-lined street. We got the feeling that Joan and Kareem weren't yet at home there. Taiwo had been staying with them to ease the transition. As we sat at the kitchen table, sunlight pouring in around still-drawn blinds, Kempton's blank dog-tags dangled from Taiwo's neck. It was a late mid-week morning, and Joan and Kareem were resting upstairs. Sleep hadn't come easily to them of late.

Taiwo had already been approached by a slew of reporters seeking quotes for stories on Kempton's killing. Our conversation was different. As he said, we're his people. You'd never know it from the stories that followed his death, but Kempton's life exemplified our culture. "I mean, deejaying, emceeing, breakdancing and graffiti—he had it all," Taiwo said. "He was hip-hop. He was loyal to the music from day one." Another point that Taiwo emphasized: Kempton's homeboys call him *Kemp'n*.

They also both worked with children in their community. "He's like the MVP of the Boys and Girls Club staff," explained Taiwo. "Cause he's worked at three different Boys and Girls Clubs in this city." In 2001 Kempton started the Torch Club, a group for nine-to thirteen-year-olds at Eastview Community Centre, in his and Taiwo's Blake-Boulton neighbourhood in Toronto's east end. The program revolved around a handful of core principles: leadership development, education and career exploration, volunteering in the community, social recreation, lifestyle and fitness. In practice it meant fundraising, braving the winter cold to break ice off the community centre's stairs, learning about hygiene, and summer games of football wherever an open field could be found. "Most times his team would beat my team," said Tai. "It was fun, man!"



"Kemp'n"

Contrary to some people's preconceptions about a young black man rocking a black do-rag with an Atlanta Falcons jersey, Kempton Howard just tried to do the right thing. As a result, his murder drew significant attention from the city's major media and, by extension, politicians. A lengthy piece in the *Toronto Star*, a moment of silence at City Hall and mention of his name in the House of Commons—his killing didn't pass as "Homicide 61/2003," just another number in police records. But it all still fell short of doing Kempton's life justice.

"If there's a story in it then they'll talk about it," said Taiwo. "So branding him as a community leader—and I guess he is—but branding him as a community leader makes the story more poignant, and I guess it helps to form an idea of who he was, and an image and stuff like that. He was a lot more than that to me." The media's response also made clear how much less the city's other victims of gun violence meant. "His death would not normally have earned more than a day's worth of media coverage," said CBC's *News Online* on January 28, 2004, with surprising candour. "After all, he was a young black man living in a low-income neighbourhood. On Toronto's 2003 homicide roster, that description hardly made him stand out."

Most on that sad list would be publicly characterized more like O'Neil Ricardo Greenland, a.k.a. Heavy D, written up by the *Toronto Sun's* Ian Robertson on February 8, 2004, as just "one more in a long line of black street thugs slain in Toronto." Police know where the gun that Heavy D used to kill ended up. They found it on the ground beside him after he was shot several times in a Scarborough strip-mall parking lot, dead at twenty-two in what the cops told Robertson was a case of "simple retribution and revenge." Two weeks earlier Heavy D had used his 9mm Bryco pistol to kill two people and wound another outside a storefront nightclub. "That was just one helluva night," recalled Robertson, referring to late 2002's "bloody Sunday"—so named by Toronto police for four murders committed within just eighty minutes. "Then [Heavy D] thirteen days later buying it in the way he knew he'd buy it."

Beneath his newspaper's sensational headlines, which on the last day of 2003 labelled Toronto "Gun City," Robertson used police sources to trace Heavy D's gun from southern California's "Ring of Fire"—where cheap, easily concealable Saturday-night-special handguns such as Greenland's 9mm were once made—through a Florida pawnshop and across the forty-ninth parallel into Heavy D's hands. When forensic scientists finally raised the gun's serial numbers, they discovered the digits 1460666, which, wrote Robertson, "branded it as the Devil's gun." He told us, "Heavy D knew he'd die. There's no way he couldn't have. And he was just a starter. There are other killers in this city who've killed a lot more people than he did."

Recollect your thoughts, don't get caught up in the mix  
'Cause the media is full of dirty tricks

—2Pac, "Only God Can Judge Me," off *All Eyez on Me* (1996)

Linda Diebel covered Kempton Howard's murder for the *Toronto Star*. An award-winning journalist, Diebel has reported from Colombia, Haiti and others among the world's poorest and most violent places. For the kids who suffered what she saw as the "mistrust, suspicion and pain" in the Blake-Boulton community following Kempton's killing, Diebel wrote, "the danger is everywhere." Taiwo's was a prominent voice in her article, but he believes Diebel's take was twisted. "We're a community!" Tai said. "Most people interact with people when they see you in the street. So it's more of a friendly type of neighbourhood. And we have Eastview Neighbourhood Community Centre, which is one of the greatest places on earth."

Diebel described Kempton Howard's body as it was prepared for burial—"cold, so cold"—and the violence and fear that had supposedly shaken and cowed a community. "I don't feel that way," said Taiwo, now twenty-six, "and my brother didn't feel that way either."

In May 2005 we ate lunch with Taiwo and his brother. Also a close friend of Kempton's, Taiwo's twin, Kehinde (pronounced *Kane-day*) Bah, is one of the city's most respected youth activists and a member of Toronto mayor David Miller's Community Safety Advisory Committee. Over Greek food on nearby Danforth Avenue—Kempton and Tai's

favourite place to grab grub—we talked about Kehinde’s recent trip to Nigeria, the brothers’ country of origin; hip-hop; a couple of recent shootings in the neighbourhood around the Eastview Community Centre and their effect on the Torch Club kids; and Diebel’s story. Kehinde said he wanted to use the opportunity that Diebel’s article offered to suggest solutions to the problem of gun violence among youth in our city.

“I was still pretty fucked up about what happened,” Kehinde remembered of his meeting with Diebel. “But here’s this woman, just like, ‘I don’t want to talk about solutions. No, don’t worry—I been to Compton, I been to South Central, I’ve done stories from there. Can you take me to Regent Park [a troubled neighbourhood in a different part of town] and walk me around and get me interviews with some guys? We’ll give you seventy-five bucks a day.’ I’m like, ‘Who is this woman, yo? What da heck? Who are you?’ Like, I just want to talk about solutions.” Kehinde never appears in Diebel’s 2,700-word story.

Asked to comment on Kehinde’s version of her visit, Diebel would say only, “Was Kehinde Bah supposed to be mentioned in my story about Kempton? His twin, Taiwo, was part of the narrative, as you saw, because he dressed Kempton [at the funeral], etc. I don’t think I can help you further because writing this story as well as follow when suspects were arrested and charged with Kempton’s murder was all I did.” The *Toronto Star*’s approach isn’t that surprising. In so many ways, the voice of youth, their own perspective on the problems they deal with, goes ignored. “How the media frames it,” said Kehinde, “is young people are [committing] crimes. These people are really wild and really just uncontrollable. They ain’t like a regular breed of normal kids.”

The media’s casting of youth as a social threat is by no means unique to Toronto. John Dilulio, then a professor of politics and public affairs at Princeton University, wrote a November 27, 1995, cover story for *Weekly Standard* magazine titled “The Coming of the Super-Predators.” Dilulio’s article warned of the emergence of “ever growing numbers of hardened, remorseless juvenile criminals [who] are creating a group of ‘super-predators’ that has not yet begun to crest. Americans are sitting atop a demographic time bomb of youth offenders who maim or kill on impulse, without any intelligible motive for rehabilitation.”

“And it’s funny,” Kehinde continued, “because most of the time the violence occurs between youth. Yet they find some way to put it on the news, on mainstream news, and cover it like it’s affecting everybody, when everybody don’t really care.” In November 2003 then police chief Julian Fantino added his own take on the situation in Toronto, telling CBC News, “These gun-toting gangsters we have here now have absolutely no fear of the system, no fear of the law.” It would be a familiar refrain during Fantino’s five-year tenure as the city’s top cop. Before he “hung up his guns,” as the *National Post* put it, on March 26, 2005 (the city opted not to renew his contract), Fantino in a February 14, 2005, CTV News report again warned of the many “hard-core gun-crazed gangsters” running Toronto’s streets. The *Toronto Sun* called them the “gang time bomb.” Fantino warned the public of another potential threat.

I ain’t a Blood or a Crip, I’m doin’ my own thang  
G-Unit! Shit, I done started my own gang  
I don’t do that funny dance, I don’t throw gang signs  
But I’m gangsta to the core, so I stay with a 9

— 50 Cent, “Bump That,” off *50 Cent Is the Future* (2002)

In April 2004, at a church in Toronto’s long-troubled Jane-Finch community, Chief Fantino joined a “town hall” meeting convened to discuss local gun violence. The chief was asked by a woman in the audience whether the sale of toy guns might somehow be prevented. Choosing to dismiss her concern, saying, “We can’t police everything,” Fantino instead attacked the influence of a menace much nearer to his heart—rap music.

A small media scrum followed, during which a forthright radio reporter and black activist, Denise Burnett, contended that she and her friends “had grown up with music videos and rap and hadn’t been ‘influenced’ to pick up a gun.” Fantino clarified that he was “talking about how people are influenced by the negatives that do happen to be out there. If

you're influenced positively by 50 Cent, who talks about killing people and raping women and killing cops, then God bless you."

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During the exchange the chief twice labelled rapper 50 Cent a criminal. He also shot back that he had written more than once to then minister of immigration Denis Coderre to prevent the New York City native from entering Canada to perform in Toronto. Fantino cited a murder that took place in the summer of 2003 after a Toronto concert featuring 50 Cent and fellow rapper Jay-Z. As crowds departing the concert and a fireworks display on the nearby lakeshore converged, twenty-four-year-old Msemaji Granger was gunned down in a homicide that remains unsolved.

MuchMusic, Canada's music television station, asked us, as co-creators of Canada's foremost hip-hop magazine, to respond to Fantino's town hall comments. Nearly an hour of interviews with us produced only a few ten-second sound bites, including something like "Fantino doesn't know hip-hop, he doesn't know 50 Cent and he should shut his mouth." Our thoughts on the roots of gun violence, the need to address context and the lack of opportunity were mostly lost to the station's archives; our efforts to speak seriously were reduced to a few confrontational clips.

Taiwo remembers the first time he heard 50 Cent. While he was working in downtown Toronto, a bootlegger put a mix-tape into his hands: "I'm like, 'What da? What is this?' I tried to listen to it and it's just all killin' and da, da, da. 'Yo, I can't listen to this. This is a joke! Ain't this the guy that got dissed by Jay-Z? Forget this, man! 50 Cent?!' He's holdin' a gun with a cross hangin' from the barrel—this guy's goin' to hell too!"

As Taiwo often did, he passed the mix-tape on to Kempton. "He was in love with Fifty! He was like, 'Yo, when Fifty blows!' And then 50 Cent got signed to Shady [Eminem's record label]. Uh-oh. And then 50 Cent blew up, and Kemp'n was just on board from day one. The first mix-tape, he was on board. It was crazy—crazy how he called that. He does that frequently."

When you think about it, Julian Fantino and 50 Cent aren't that different. In February 2004 the *Toronto Star* described the chief as "always controversial, never shy, often embroiled in controversy." The description would work equally well for Fifty. "If all that controversy wasn't making money, he wouldn't do it," Taiwo said. "Fantino's helping him. That's buyin' into the persona."

When Rodrigo sat down to interview him in San Francisco in February 2005, 50 Cent admitted as much. Buns told Fiddy he was from Toronto. "I think you know our police chief, Julian Fantino."

"Yeah," Fiddy answered, "he don't really like me."

"He called you a criminal," Rodrigo said. "He wrote a letter to Immigration, and he didn't want you to get through. What do you think about that?"

"Well, you know, you have people that go on your past. My past is my shadow. I was active illegally. I had the opportunity to make music. I understand where he is making his assumption, so I'm not upset with him. I just think he needs to broaden his thinking."

"Actually," Fifty added later, "what he does by saying that—'cause he's not that bright—is he turns kids on to us more. When you tell a kid they can't do something, they wanna know why. 'I can't listen to this 'cause you said so? Now I wanna hear it even more.'" *The New York Times* reported on December 26, 2004, that Fifty had made roughly \$50 million that year. Condemnations such as Fantino's have evidently profited both 50 Cent and the corporations he works for.

A continent away, the offensive against "gangsta rap" had taken on a British accent. As a New Year's Day party in Birmingham, England, crept into the early hours of January 2, 2003, two innocent women, eighteen-year-old Charlene Ellis and Letisha Shakespeare, who was just seventeen, were killed by submachine-gun fire in a drive-by shooting. The tragedy provided, in the words of Shakespeare's aunt, a "wake-up call" for a community while drawing the attention of a nation. BBC News declared the shooting "revenge" and a "botched gang attack." Not a week later on January 6, 2003, the BBC also reported that Britain's home secretary David Blunkett had "launched an attack on violent gangster rap music,

condemning it as ‘appalling.’” Appearing on BBC Radio 2, Blunkett pointed to a connection between rap, drugs and gun violence.

“I am not going to get into the issue of censoring,” Blunkett said—stopping short of measures taken in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where authorities banned foreign rap music in June 2004—“but I am concerned that we need to talk to the record producers, to the distributors, to those who are actually engaged in the music business about what is and isn’t acceptable.” Blunkett reportedly made his statements after listening to Jay-Z’s song “U Don’t Know Me.”

If Blunkett were a tad more tuned in, he would have realized that he’d missed rap’s prime target. On April 18, 2005, *Business Week’s* David Kiley reported that 50 Cent’s “Reebok line, I am told, is outselling Jay-Z’s Reeboks, which were already outselling basketball star Allen Iverson’s.” Anti-gun activists in the U.K. were more on the mark when they denounced a commercial from Reebok’s “I Am What I Am” campaign. In the ad 50 Cent counts from one to nine, indicating the number of times he was shot in a now infamous drug-related incident in Queens, New York. When asked by the commercial’s disembodied interviewer, “Tell me, who do you plan to massacre next?” Fifty can only laugh—his recently released album was titled *The Massacre*. Responding to over fifty viewer complaints, the U.K.’s Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) said it had been persuaded that “the advertisement endorsed [Fifty’s] type of lifestyle and disregarded the unsavoury and perilous aspects of it by implying it was possible to survive being shot nine times.” Reebok soon pulled the plug; their spokesperson said the ad was “intended to be a positive and empowering celebration of this right of freedom of self-expression, individuality and authenticity.” The commitment of footwear companies to individual self-expression is also evident along so many Third World assembly lines.

Although the anti-gun advocates succeeded in pushing the ASA to remove the ad from British airwaves, they did little to discourage those who helped make 2004 one of the most financially successful years in Reebok’s history. And the media had helped by pouring out free publicity. John Rosenthal, of the New England-based anti-gun group Stop Handgun Violence, joined the fray, calling the advertisement “unconscionable.” “If Reebok doesn’t take the ad off the air in the US, it should be ashamed of itself,” the *Boston Globe* further quoted Rosenthal. “To glorify the fact that 50 Cent has been shot nine times, and to use him as a role model for inner-city kids to sell your product is a dangerous thing.” Except a lot of inner-city kids can’t afford a new pair of Reeboks.

“Maybe he is a negative influence,” Taiwo clarified, “but I don’t think it’s on the ’hood so much as it’s on the suburbs. They’re the ones that buy most hip-hop, right? Seventy percent. If you go to a concert, what colour you gonna see in the crowd? You gonna see all white folks. Ain’t nothin’ wrong with that, but these artists, they know that. They know that it’s kind of an inside-out mentality that people have—where they’re outside, but they hear about and they see in movies and they have their perception of how it is in the ’hood. So there’s this whole kinda fascination with that whole culture and that whole way of life. That’s why I think it’s so popular. These guys are just sayin’ how it is and how they livin’, and people are like, ‘Wow!’ They’re just kinda peekin’ over the fence.”

In the early nineties, as she pursued a PhD in criminology, Deanna Wilkinson employed peer mentors to interview some four hundred young men in New York about their experiences with violence in the inner city. “The thing that kept hitting me in the head,” she said, “was the fact that none of the people who were supposedly trying to solve the problem had *any idea* what was going on with youth. So my thought was, well, if we really want to understand community dynamics we need to hear from the youth and find out what they’re struggling with.”

The study culminated in her book *Guns, Violence and Identity among African-American and Latino Youth*. Through vivid personal accounts, Dr. Wilkinson’s research provides an insightful look into the causes of urban violence among young minority males. Nowhere in her book is “gangster rap” mentioned. We asked Dr. Wilkinson, now a professor of criminal justice at Ohio State University, whether rap music came up in the many lengthy interviews that were conducted for her study. “Many of them saw being performers in the music industry or trying to cut an album as a rapper as a way of social mobility,” she answered. “And in terms of that influencing their violent event, or the context of more and more

violence in the neighbourhood, I don't think they made any connection whatsoever to that. I don't think it had any real causal link. It was more like looking at a mirror, instead of looking at an open door.”

Brooklyn, New York, rap artist Shyne knows how to distinguish reality from fiction. He's already been involved in more than one violent event in his short life. At fifteen Shyne almost lost an arm to a shotgun blast. At twenty-two he was sentenced to ten years in prison for his role in a December 1999 nightclub shootout in New York City. Shyne contends that he was defending not just himself, but also those he was partying with, including rapper P. Diddy and his then girlfriend, Jennifer Lopez.

“Somebody pulled out a gun and shot!” Shyne, locked up in New York State's Clinton Correctional Facility said emphatically of the confrontation at Club New York. “That's how I pulled my ratchet out. That whole situation was serious. Once again—*real* killas. It wasn't no punks, it wasn't no rappers that talk in the studio. These were some real killas. That's what they do: they shoot people for fun, ya understand? So I knew when they pulled that thing out, this wasn't no rap video; this is for real. Somebody was gonna die. It wasn't gonna be me.”

Shyne explained why he thinks hip-hop is so often named as the source of the gun problem: “It's a scapegoat theory. It's easy to just point to the disenfranchised, 'cause we're not Rupert Murdoch—we don't own the media channels that's gonna get our point across. So it's easy to just say anything about us and there won't be any counterbalance to it, ya dig?”

The vast majority of fans don't take to rap music as gospel, but hip-hop lyrics do provide some balance against the demonization of young black men apparent in mainstream media. Lyrics can illuminate how youth see their world and how they feel the need, right or wrong, to survive it. The bible of firearms research, *Small Arms Survey*, reveals in its 2006 edition that young men between the ages of 15 and 29 account for half of all gun murders annually, amounting to as many as 100,000 homicides worldwide each year. Most often produced by the same demographic, hip-hop can provide an inside perspective from those who are both the most vulnerable to victimization by guns and the most likely to perpetrate gun crime. Hate it or love it, 50 Cent's music represents an attitude that already exists among many young men. But young men aren't the only ones with an affinity for firearms.

While a younger generation of males destroys itself in the poor communities of the West, there is an older, deeper and richer side to gun culture that goes on without sparking the horrendous headlines. As guns are bought, bodied, tossed and replaced, as blood flows in the streets, the profits trickle straight to the top.

Man, I ain't dense, I know what you represent  
Guns or tobacco, the richest one per cent

— Mighty Casey, “Down with Bush,” off *Original Rudebwoy* (2004)

In June 2006, the *Smoking Gun* posted a catalogue of gifts given to U.S. government officials in 2004. Among the presents accepted by President George W. Bush were a Dakota Arms sniper rifle valued at \$10,000 and ten vintage firearms worth another \$12,000. All came from Jordan's King Abdullah, including a circa-1884 Colt revolver.

CNN separately reported that in 2004 the most expensive Christmas gift the President received was a shotgun valued at \$14,153. The shotgun was a gift from Ed Weatherby, the son of Roy Weatherby, a legend in gun design and manufacturing. The younger Weatherby had previously presented George Bush Sr. with, according to Weatherby's website, the “first U.S.-produced Custom Mark V rifle.”

We're not sure whether the president keeps any of the aforementioned guns in the White House. But they'd complement rather nicely another piece that George Jr. keeps on display for his guests. On June 7, 2004, *Time* magazine reported that troops involved in pulling ousted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein from his hole had presented the president with the handgun that Hussein was clutching when he was captured. Presumably because the twin AK-47s Hussein also had with him would have been a bit overstated, the mounted pistol now sits at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. “He really

liked showing it off,” *Time* quoted a visitor who had seen it. “He was really proud of it.”

Another son of a gun-loving dad, Trigger Tha Gambler learned at a tender age from his “straight gangster” father how to use firearms. Talking to us from a friend’s balcony overlooking the projects where he grew up, the Brownsville, New York, rap artist remembered the first time he and his brother, Smoothie Da Hustler, were exposed to guns. “My father was kinda like the first one that showed us how to really shoot a weapon, took us on the roof and showed us, and that was at the age of four and five,” Trig explained. “Because it’s the same thing that’s going on in a lot of other countries, where they raisin’ they kids and showin’ ’em how to shoot off those weapons. That’s protection. Guns is power.”

Maybe it was the blunt he was smoking, but Trigger got open when we asked about gun violence in New York City. “It got more violent, honestly,” he said. “People think it slowed down because the World Trade Center went down and terrorists, so they took all of the attention off what’s really happening in the communities, but a lot of things are still going on out here. My friend runs King’s County Morgue that’s out here. And we’ll go by the morgue to pick him up and see him, and he’s in there with over forty young men that’s in the age range of I’d say from seventeen to twenty-seven, that’s dead, all from a bullet shot—one bullet shot. I saw that one day—I walked in the morgue and there were so many guys laid in there, and every one had one bullet shot: one to the head, one to the neck, one in the chest, one here, one there—and I’m looking at this and I’m like, ‘Well, damn! I doubt if half of these fuckin’ people will ever be talked about.’ The news need to come out and really show what’s going on out here in the communities, and not just the shit they want to *hand-pick* to talk about.”

When youth have had their voices stripped away through obvious and insidious means, it’s easy to blame them for the gun problem, to frame the issue as one of evil kids from scary neighbourhoods pushed to pull triggers by similarly wicked rappers. The stereotypes are already there for politicians and the media to build on.

Few would deny that rap music plays a role in the problem with guns—especially not us. We took on this subject partly because of how irresponsible gun-talk had become in the music we love. And what hip-hop says can make a lot of difference. “Hip-Hop has to bear some of the responsibility,” said Boston’s Ed O.G., a gang member turned positive rap artist. “I don’t think we should take the full blame for half of the shit that’s goin’ on out here, but we do talk about it and we do promote it, *all* the time.”

Rap music may have picked up the torch of gun glorification in America, but that flame has been burning since before William F. Cody began mythologizing frontier life in his travelling show, “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” which he created in 1882. Pimping gun culture, rappers join an elite class. Whatever blame is due some emcees for gun violence, at least as much is due outside of hip-hop: on the factories where firearms are manufactured, on the halls of government where laws take shape, on the offices of corporate media where decisions are made to take financial advantage of a profound fascination with the image of guns. In *Enter the Babylon System* we look closer at this broader culture of firearms, its many contributing factors and faces and, finally, at its impact on our society. By the end of this book we hope it’s clear that when it comes to guns, to borrow the immortal words of dead prez, the problem is “bigger than hip-hop”—much bigger.

Like Kempton and Taiwo, countless kids before us and millions since, we became friends through hip-hop, the music providing the soundtrack to our lives and the backbone of our friendship.

In 1997 we travelled together to Havana, Cuba, for the World Festival of Youth and Students, taking sacks of cassettes with us but only Walkmans to play them on. We soon realized the error of our self-centred North American ways and bought a boom box at a local American-style, no-Cubans-allowed department store. We jammed some batteries in the back, popped in EPMD’s *Business as Usual* and travelled the city with the volume on ten and a satchel full of backup batteries, the boom box quickly becoming our calling card. At the conference’s American pavilion (as in *nuestra America*) we sat on the huge concrete dock, boom box booming, rapping to the music. Everyone stopped to chat, but the hip-hoppers—Colombian, Mexican, Cuban and American—stayed to chill. We traded tapes, trivia and stories with our new

friends, just as the two of us had done years earlier.

The following spring we began work on the second stage of our hip-hop lives—we became contributors to the culture. In May 1998 *Pound* magazine was born. We sought to capture the essence of the culture in print, but also, and more important, to represent the philosophies and ideas that had birthed it, from Martin and Malcolm to Kool Herc and Bambaataa.

Our third issue, in May 2000, gave rise to what would eventually lead to this book: the “Babylon System” column. The name came from reggae music, where the ancient name “Babylon” refers to oppressive colonial and imperial powers. In our hands, Babylon came to mean a broader view of injustice—injustice so ingrained as to have become, we believed, as much systemic and self-perpetuating as it was the result of individual agendas. The column’s first instalment featured a snippet about the LAPD’s Rampart Division CRASH program (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums), an anti-gang squad of elite officers who were eventually implicated in drug trafficking, robbery and even attempted murder. The other item in that first column outlined an in-studio stabbing incident between Ja-Rule’s crew and a then little-known rapper-50 Cent.

What began as a small idea soon evolved into our most popular section. Our February 2002 issue featured a “Babylon System” column about the “war on drugs.” The columns mixed hip-hop lyrics with commentary from world-renowned academics and hip-hop artists, thus creating an intersection between the hip-hop generation and the rest of the world. Those early pieces would define the style of our political coverage and proved to be the platform we had always wanted to create: a socio-political voice for our culture that would also reach the community at large.

In November 2003 we published a five-thousand-word examination of gun culture and gun violence. One rapper after another described the violence they had seen in their communities; all had lost friends, and many had been shot at or wounded. While the stories of carnage surprised us, the rappers recounted in a non-sensational, almost mundane fashion.

When we met 50 Cent in 2005, his G-Unit crew had five members, and four of them had been shot. Asked if this experience had created a special bond between them, Fifty responded in the same laid-back monotone with which he answers all questions: “No, I think when you come from that actual environment you’re subjected to those things. That just goes to show you how common that is for something like that to happen where we come from. [Getting] shot is not even a big deal. It’s like, ‘What? Where you got shot at?’ ‘At the club.’”

There is outrage in the communities affected by gun violence; organizations and activists work tirelessly to lower the body count and increase the peace. But within the hip-hop community there is also a disturbing sense of resignation and acceptance.

In February 2006 we bumped into Canada’s most critically acclaimed, commercially successful hip-hop artist, k-os. Kevin Brereton knew that we were writing a book and asked for an on-the-spot synopsis. “It’s about gun culture and gun violence,” Rodrigo told him, “from a hip-hop perspective.” Kevin grimaced. “Great,” he said. “Like the world needs another reason to put hip-hop and guns together.” It stung to hear those words from an artist and friend, but maybe Kevin was right.

Hip-Hop has long been stigmatized as a violent culture, the public’s perception provoked by news reports of dead rappers and the menacing swagger of artists in movies and videos. But at its best hip-hop is about knowledge and empowerment first, and here we combine the insights of lyrics with the lessons of experience and share them with the larger community. *Enter the Babylon System* is our attempt to reassert hip-hop’s stature as a political and cultural voice.



FIRST CHAMBER  
**THE TRADE OF THE TOOL**

**IN TRYING TO UNDERSTAND** the presence of guns and the culture that surrounds them, made sense to start at the beginning, with those who make the guns. It made sense too to start with the sources closest to home, the small handful of very successful firearm manufacturers in our own country. Savage Arms, headquartered in Massachusetts, turns out old-school sporting rifles at their factory in Lakefield, Ontario. But Statistics Canada reports that between 1974 and 2003 the percentage of rifles and shotguns used in homicides in Canada decreased from 64 percent to just 20 percent. American statistics reflect a similar trend, as does popular culture. On the other hand, the number of handguns used in Canadian homicides increased from 27 percent in 1974 to 68 percent in 2003. It's the little gats that get us.

Of the weapons industry, British journalist Gideon Burrows has written in his *No-Nonsense Guide to the Arms Trade*, "The arms business in today's world has a friendly, respectable facade but it is as murky, secretive and amoral as it has always been." It isn't all so secretive. Most of the gun manufacturers we approached responded to our polite inquiries in kind, and we successfully solicited the thoughts of numerous industry leaders. When it came to Canada's only handgun maker, however, we weren't quite as successful.

## PARA-NOID

The first time we heard of Canada's only maker of handguns, it was in an interview with Matthew Behrens of Homes Not Bombs (HNB), a Toronto-based coalition of activists who oppose the weapons industry and the Canadian government's financial support of arms manufacturers, arguing that those dollars would be better spent housing the homeless. Behrens can talk for hours about SNC TEC of Le Gardeur, Quebec, a member of a multinational consortium of weapons manufacturers organized to help the U.S. Department of Defense meet its "emergency" demand for small-arms ammunition in Iraq. He also knows plenty about a company in Kitchener, Ontario, previously known as Diemaco, Canada's largest manufacturer of machine guns and assault rifles. When we spoke with him in early 2002, we asked if he knew of any other gun makers in Canada.

"There's one in Scarborough called something-Ordnance," Behrens answered, at first uncertain. "Para-Ordnance! That's what they're called." The name was all Matt could give us. It was the first time we had heard of the company. Since that conversation with Matt, we've spoken with others involved in researching the weapons business who knew surprisingly little about this obscure gun maker in the Toronto suburbs.

Project Ploughshares is a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Kitchener, Ontario, that conducts peace-seeking research on the arms industry in Canada and abroad. In the summer of 2004 we sat down in their offices with a couple of the NGO's representatives, Lynne Griffiths-Fulton and Ken Epps. Having studied Canadian military exports and imports for many years, weapons-wise there isn't much Epps can't update you on. "Para-Ordnance we know virtually nothing about," he confessed, "and I've been looking at this stuff for awhile."

They took away my right to bear arms  
What I'm 'posed to fight with, bare palms?

— Eminem, "We as Americans," off *Encore* (2000)

Attila “Ted” Szabo’s family became refugees after the 1956 Hungarian revolution, in which students led a movement to break the Soviet Union’s iron-fisted grip on their country. Joseph Stalin had died three years before, and young Hungarians were ready to get free or die trying. After student marches in the streets of Budapest inspired the masses to join them, the Hungarian police opened fire on crowds of protestors, killing hundreds. In response, the workers at arms factories distributed guns to the people, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In the wake of the revolution, Szabo’s family fled Hungary for Greece, where, as a boy, he met Thanos Polyzos. Eventually both Szabo and Polyzos settled in Canada, where Szabo asked his old friend, a lawyer, to become his partner at Para-Ordnance in the mid-1980s. In the years since, *Guns & Ammo* magazine has declared, the “T&T team has proved to be a fruitful and dynamic partnership.”

In one of several “president’s letters” posted on his company’s website, Szabo shares his views on individual liberty. “There are elitists that believe they know what is best for others,” he writes. “We must constantly be on guard against those who would limit our personal freedoms for their agendas of how they think the average man should spend his life. The American Bill of Rights is an important guarantee of personal freedoms. You have to live without such freedoms as the right to speak your mind, to worship as you choose, and to protect yourself and your family to really appreciate them. I know firsthand the tyranny of oppression, because as a boy my family followed that beacon of freedom to North America from behind the Iron Curtain.”

Szabo’s is a fascinating story and, wanting to learn more, we contacted his company for an interview and tour of their factory. Obviously we didn’t expect Para-Ordnance to be so terribly “on guard.” The company’s first reply thanked us for our interest, but declined our request as a matter of policy. When we pressed, Para were quick to remind us that we were playing with the big guns now:

Dear Sir:

It has been the long standing policy of this company not to grant tours or interviews. Whether it be for security reasons that we wish not to do so, or otherwise, we believe that we live in a country that grants us that choice....

Given the fact that your magazine appears to have no connection to the business world or our specific industry, and also given the times we live in, we feel it prudent to turn this matter over to the authorities who are better equipped to investigate the motives behind your inexorable interest in our company. We will also be handing this matter over to legal counsel for any civil action that we may be advised to pursue against you and your employers.

Govern yourselves accordingly.

In the same president’s letter, Szabo further expands upon his perspective on freedom. “Everyone involved in our industry should be thankful for the Second Amendment in the Constitution of the United States of America. The spirit of freedom and responsibility espoused in the Second Amendment is the guarantor of all personal freedoms. It continues to be a guiding light wherever terrorists and tyrants try to hobble the rights of the people. Remember that gun control is really about people control. Wherever people are not able to protect themselves, there will be those that will foster slavery, or worse, upon them.”

Canada has nothing in its constitution like the Second Amendment, which reads, “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the People to

keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.” Instead, nearly two hundred years later, Canada instituted the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which seems to work relatively well as guarantor of individual liberty against abuses by the state and its agents. As a marketing tool for selling guns, it’s much less useful.

A man with more demands on his time than Eminem, MIT linguistics professor and author Noam Chomsky told journalist David Barsamian in 1994, “After decades of intensive business propaganda, people feel that the government is some kind of enemy and that they have to defend themselves from it.” A decade later, when we told him about Szabo’s position, his attitude hadn’t changed. “It is utterly fanciful,” Chomsky maintained. “I presume many of those who invoke a dubious interpretation of the Second Amendment are quite serious about defending freedom, moreso the pity. It’s a real pathology, and is surely being exploited very cynically.”

The industry, stay in the dirt, play in the dirt  
Test the wrong one in the industry and you will get hurt  
I’m not an industry artist; I’m an artist in the industry

— DMX, “The Industry,” off *Year of the Dog Again* (2000)

Ted Szabo sees himself as an artist. In another president’s letter he reveals, “For me, the art of handgun design has been my lifelong passion and my sculptures come from the molds we make here at Para. Just as artists from one generation look to the genius of the previous generation, I have been inspired by John Moses Browning. Browning created a beautiful work of art when he designed the 1911 pistol. For some people it is the ultimate example of form and function. As great as Browning’s 1911 was, I dreamed of making it even better by giving it more capacity.”

Although John Browning’s name would never become a famous brand, the Colts and Winchester of the world owe much of their fame to his genius. Browning was, in the words of military weapons historian and author Robert Slayton, “simply the greatest inventor in the history of firearms.” Born in 1855 and raised as a Mormon in Ogden, Utah, Browning designed his first gun at the age of ten. By the time John was twenty, his father, also a gun designer, proclaimed that his son’s designs were the best he had seen. Browning would soon sell his first patent for a legendary lever-action rifle, later labelled the Winchester 1885. But it would be his handgun patent purchased by the Colt Firearms company that really established Browning’s reputation.

As the nineteenth century was drawing to an end, Browning engineered among the world’s most famous handguns. Known as the Model 1911 or, more commonly, the Colt .45, Browning’s original creation would be hailed by many as the perfect pistol. His sidearm would go on to serve the American military, among others, for the next seventy years.

John Browning was hard at work on what would become another classic design when he died in 1926. His protégé, Dieudonné Saive, completed the project, a 9mm semi-automatic handgun that featured the first high-capacity double-column magazine. Eventually manufactured by Belgium’s Fabrique Nationale, or FN Herstal, the Model 1935 Grand Puissance held thirteen rounds. This final contribution from the man the History Channel called “the Einstein of gun design” would become popularly known as the Browning Hi-

Power. (He couldn't say with certainty, because the gun had yet to be recovered, but when we asked about the handgun used to kill Kempton Howard, Toronto homicide detective Randy Carter said, "I believe the gun was a Browning 9mm semi-automatic")

Ted Szabo's claim to fame is his engineering of a 1911 that holds double the seven rounds handled by Browning's original design. For those below the border with a penchant for carrying concealed weapons, Para-Ordnance has also added an "abbreviated" version of the 1911. The Para-Carry holds seven rounds and features a tidy three-inch barrel. For its accomplishments in firearms design Para-Ordnance won three consecutive awards from *Guns & Ammo* magazine, culminating in the 2001 Innovation of the Year editors' award for the Para-Carry.

According to Industry Canada, Para-Ordnance now exports between \$500,000 and \$1 million worth of product annually, although a 2006 report by Ken Epps—he'd evidently brushed up on Para since we first met—believes "this volume range may be understated." The company has shipped to several countries, including Brazil, South Africa, the Philippines and Algeria, as well as just about every U.S. state. In a relatively short time—around two decades—Para—Ordnance has made a mark on the firearms business comparable to companies ten times its age.

## BLOWING SMOKE

In May 2005 we got the chance to visit Inner City Visions in Toronto's Lakeshore area. It's a community group established to, among other things, help young musicians develop their careers, providing free studio time and other services. We'd been invited by Mayhem Morearty, a member of Hu\$tlemann, a rap group that includes several members from Toronto's Jane-Finch community. Upon arrival, Mayhem introduced us to his homeboys Jet Black and C-4. In a boardroom above the I. C. Visions studio, we sat down with the three young artists to get their take on the gun situation in Toronto.

Jet Black, now in his mid-twenties, drew attention to generational differences. "Before we like you get a gun when you're like eighteen, or like twenty. Now it's like fifteen, sixteen, ten!" he exclaimed. "I don't wanna blame music, 'cause it's not really music or hip-hop or none of that, so dead all that."

"So you don't think hip-hop has an influence?"

"I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a factor," Mayhem answered.

"'Cause that's where you mostly hear about the guns," Black admitted. "The new kind of gun, then you're like, 'Yooooo!' And then you go, you'll kill yourself to look for it, to buy it."

Then Mayhem surprised us. "A lot of people don't know," he said, "Canada is one of the biggest manufacturers for guns, youknowwhat-I mean?"

"For everything!" Jet Black interjected.

"It's just that our legislation most of the time prohibits the carrying, the possession of firearms," Mayhem continued. "But Canada actually manufactures the majority of the guns on the market." We knew it's nowhere close to the majority, but we let it slide, too interested in what Mayhem, who has himself been arrested on gun charges until cleared based on an illeg

search, might know about the handgun maker that had proven so elusive. “Yeah, like Para-Ordnance,” Chris said. “What about those? Can you get those on the streets?”

“Oh, yeah, man. Para-Ordnance got that new joint with thirty in the clip,” Mayhem laughed. “It’s like an Uzi, but it’s not, youknowwhat-I mean? It’s crazy! Big shout-outs to Para-Ordnance, man! Y’all need to sponsor me.”

I’m a ride in the stolen Grand Am  
Me and Mayhem, with big burners in both hands  
Hop out the whip and your folks ran  
So much guns, we could be the *Shooting Guide* spokesman  
Big MACs, P89s, .357 Mags or the Glock 9 do me just fine

— Jet Black, off Hu\$tlemann’s “Guns Are For” 12-inch (2004)

As far as we know, Para-Ordnance has yet to produce a thirty-round fully automatic handgun. Glock has engineered such a pistol, and various Browning handguns, including the Hi-Power, can reportedly be illegally modified to fire in full-auto mode. While rappers can tell you a lot about firearms and, often from painful life experience, about an aspect of gun culture the industry would rather not discuss, they remain entertainers, and often entertain much in interviews as on stage.

In 1997 researchers in Washington, D.C., attempted to evaluate knowledge of firearms brands and manufacturers among 135 young inmates. The juvenile detainees were each shown pictures of nine different guns and asked to match each gun with its name and manufacturer on their own. Among fifteen-to nineteen-year-old prisoners in the District of Columbia, 9 percent successfully matched the guns with their correct names. Like the youth in the D.C. study, most rappers are familiar with the gun industry’s established manufacturers—and they let listeners know it.

Based in San Francisco, California, American Brandstand tracks the appearance of brand names in lyrics of songs that appear in the *Billboard* Top 20 singles chart. Included in the 2004 report is a detailed discussion of hip-hop’s commercial influence that calls the culture “great barometer of consumer aspiration.” Brandstand’s Lucian James writes further, “Major brands do not appreciate the full power of hip-hop culture.... It is the defining youth movement of our era—and it’s global.” Compared with other genres such as pop and rock, which deal with “eternal themes” like love, James argues, “hip-hop tells us about now.”

In the past, most brands that rappers referred to in the Top 20 *Billboard* singles represented car, clothing and alcohol companies. But Brandstand recently identified an increasingly prevalent force in the *Billboard* brand mix. According to their report, “Another unexpected trend in 2004 was the rise in weaponry. The weapon count jumped from 11 mentions in 2003 to 53 in 2004.” The weapons brands in question were, of course, all the products of gun manufacturers.

In August 2005 we contacted Lucian James for an update. Even more so than in ’04, hip-hop had the *Billboard* charts poppin’. “Until this year,” James said, “there have been surprisingly few weapons brands in the chart, but the ‘thug’ culture of G-Unit and others has

created a market for lyrical violence, and weapons brands have begun to soar.” Among the gun brand name-droppers James cited were The Game, Trick Daddy, Snoop Dogg and Pharrell Williams.

“I don’t think it is any accident that this is happening,” said Tom Diaz, author of *Making Killing*, an account of the gun business in America. “When you have an industry that just pours this pollution into our culture, it’s going to start showing up in lots of different ways, and [rap music] is just one of them. The problem really is that these [gun brands] become icons that young people look up to or think that—an old guy like me would say-[they’re] ‘cool’ to have.”

Gun companies are getting for free what McDonald’s has already offered to pay for. According to the marketing monitor *Advertising Age*, Mickey Dee’s was willing to pay between \$1 and \$5 every time a rap song with a reference to their signature sandwich, the notorious Big Mac, reached the radio waves. “If 50 Cent says so, they’re gonna buy so many Big Macs,” the *New York Daily News* quoted one young resident of the Bronx as saying. But what happens if 50 Cent says “Beretta”?

American Brandstand believes hip-hop has the power to “make or break a brand.” In the report Lucian James cites the case of Tommy Hilfiger, who was at first opposed to an association between his clothing lines and hip-hop. “[Tommy] didn’t have a clue as to the power rappers had until I did that,” Brand Nubian’s Grand Puba told the *Village Voice* while wearing the Hilfiger logo. In time, however, Hilfiger recognized a connection between hip-hop and his bottom line, eventually sending rappers down the runway in his fashion show. But in hip-hop’s cutthroat race for style, fashion trends can go over the rail faster than Inc. cars. According to James, when hip-hop’s image leaders grew tired of Hilfiger’s all too familiar logo, his “brand suffered a steep decline.”

When we interviewed Reginald C. Dennis, co-founder of *XXL* magazine, hip-hop’s most commercially successful cultural monthly, he went to great lengths imagining the marketing possibilities for firearms manufacturers in hip-hop. “Who’s gonna be the first company,” he mused lightheartedly, “to come up with a brand new gun and say, ‘You know what, I want the G-Unit to promote this gun. They’re gonna have an ad.’ Why not? Why aren’t they doing this? This is the elephant in the room that no one’s talking about. This must be done!”

“The line doesn’t need to be crossed, because the damage is already done,” Dennis added more seriously, pointing to the example of St. Ides’ forty-ounce beers. “If you can use rappers to promote malt liquor and get kids to drink malt liquor at a young age, why not have the G-Unit promote your gun? I know the sales would go up.”

While virtually every other industry manoeuvres to exploit hip-hop’s commercial influence, gun manufacturers have been saved the work. Guns are a big part of life, death and status in the same neighbourhoods that hip-hop grew up in. It only makes sense that firearms brands would come to pervade rap music. The author of the definitive history of hip-hop, Jeff Chang, writes in *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, “The tension between culture and commerce would become one of the main storylines of the hip-hop generation.” With the remainder of this first chamber, we look more closely at a most extreme manifestation of that tension, examining a few firearms that have become the object of many a young man’s fascination.

Gunpowder is one of the world's oldest technologies, and a few firearms makers have been investing in their brands for centuries. Over 350 years before Germany's Karl Benz patented the first car in 1886, Mastro Bartolomeo Beretta was making gun barrels in the Italian village of Gardone Val Trompia. By the time Henry Ford began making Benz's idea roll in America, Samuel Colt, Oliver Winchester, Horace Smith and Daniel Wesson were already established names.

Bringing the heat for more than 150 years, the Springfield, Massachusetts, firm of Smith & Wesson has a lengthy history of its own. The storied manufacturer has made some crucial contributions to the evolution of handguns—revolvers in particular—and developed the rimfire cartridge, one of the earliest self-contained cartridges, which did away with the need to load powder, primer and bullets separately. The modern Smith & Wesson Holding Corporation manufactures high-quality handguns, from small yet powerful “super snubbies” up to the monster of all big-bore revolvers, the Model 500. Unveiled in January 2003, Smith & Wesson's polished steel .50 calibre Magnum revolver has, applauded *Guns & Ammo* “delighted power enthusiasts, killed elephants, provoked controversy and intimidated at least one gunwriter.”



### GUN SLANGIN'

Possibly taken from the Norse woman's name Gunnildr, the word *gun* emerged in Europe around the mid-1300s. In hip-hop, however, calling things by their correct name is considered lacking in imagination, and therefore lame. Back in Humphrey Bogart's day, actors playing hard-boiled detectives or lowlife criminals popularized the term *gat* (from Gatling gun). But in the years since its birth, hip-hop has introduced listeners to innumerable other slang names for the gun. In order to help our readers through some of the street talk that comes up in this book, we've prepared a little multiple-choice quiz. Time to learn some slanguage!

- |  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <b>1. Which of the following terms means to carry a gun?</b> | <b>2. Which of the following terms means to shoot someone?</b> | <b>3. Which of the following is a term for a gun?</b> |
| a) packin'   | a) wet   | a) pound  |
| b) totin'  | b) cap   | b) heater   |
| c) strapped  | c) clap  | c) ratchet  |
| d) holdin'   | d) blast   | d) twister  |

e) all of the above

e) buck

e) whistle

f) pop

f) banger

g) murk

g) burner

h) spray

h) toaster

i) let off

i) oven

j) all of the above

j) steel

k) paddle

l) pump

m) hammer

n) oowop

o) thang

p) blinker

q) jammy

r) iron

s) shotty

t) tool

u) chrome

v) flamer

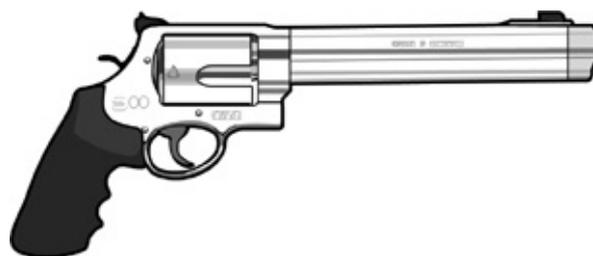
w) biscuit

x) piece

y) blix

z) all of the above

Answers: 1. (e); 2. (j); 3. (z).



S&W Model 500

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