

## **'Gangster' spotlights Detroit**

*Mekeisha Madden Toby*. [Detroit News](#). Detroit, Mich.: [Jan 9, 2007](#). pg. E.5

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This is the same question that screenwriter Barry Michael Cooper posed when he came to Detroit and researched the drug game and the Chambers. His findings would eventually inspire the 1991 movie "New Jack City," starring Wesley Snipes, Mario Van Peebles and Ice-T. Cooper also is interviewed in "American Gangster."

For a verbal and less-painful authenticity, George and other "American Gangster" producers also interviewed several Detroit historians, journalists, lawyers and figures, including former WXYZ-TV and WDIV-TV reporter Chris Hansen (now with NBC's "Dateline"); Michigan State University criminologist Dr. Carl Taylor; and legendary basketball coach Perry Watson.

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Nelson George remembers the Coleman A. Young Detroit of 20 years ago.

It was the 1980s, and the man who would author such books as "Where Did Our Love Go: The Rise and Fall of Motown" and "Hip Hop America" moved here to extensively research Motown and the city that made the musical movement a reality.

Peripherally, however, a cancer called crack was starting to devour an already wounded Detroit, still reeling from white flight, unemployment and urban blight. Amid the drug epidemic, George kept hearing the Chambers brothers' names.

Fast forward to today and George, a Brooklyn, N.Y., native, is an executive producer behind BET's highly-acclaimed crime documentary series "American Gangster," which spotlights African-American crime bosses and syndicates. While hand-selecting the first six stories to follow, he instantly thought of the Chambers, those four infamous, Arkansas-born brothers who not only put a criminal stranglehold on Detroit, but videotaped the stacks of cash their drug syndicate garnered for the whole world to see. The latter, of course, led to their demise.

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The "American Gangster" episode featuring the Chambers brothers is the sixth and final installment of the series' first season, which comes to an end tonight. Look for a second season in the fall with actor Ving Rhames returning as its smooth, baritone-voiced narrator.

"We're teaching black history from a different perspective," George says. "As African Americans, we are sensitive about the role crime has played in our community. But why is this, when we are often the victims of these very crimes?"

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"If you crossed a guy or broke one of the rules, you had to pay with your life," Cooper says in "American Gangster," referring to the Chambers brothers.

Like George, Cooper became fascinated with the sons of sharecroppers who grew up to become some of the most notorious drug lords in America and later, a cautionary tale in then-Democratic-nominee Bill Clinton's nomination speech.

The Broadmoor Apartments on West Grand Boulevard and Ferry Street that the Chambers overtook and turned into a crack den in real life inspired the fictional housing projects that Nino Brown and his Cash Money Brothers commandeered in the movie.

Unlike the New York-centered characters Nino and G-Money, Billy Joe, Willie, Larry and Otis Chambers rose from the depths of a dirt-poor town called La Grange, Ark., to rule the streets of Detroit. The brothers went on to net more than \$50 million a year in the city until Larry's ego got the best of him and he began videotaping drug deals and the family's bountiful pecuniary fruits.

DEA agents and police found Larry Chambers' movies during several routine raids, evidence that helped convict the brothers in 1988. Larry Chambers, whose letter is quoted throughout tonight's episode, is serving a life sentence in Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas. The maximum security residences of the other brothers, who got lesser sentences, are not given.

But as it has with the stories of Ricky Ross, Tookie Williams and the Smith brothers before, "American Gangster" goes below the surface with this piece, first dissecting the city and then the criminals. Get ready to watch a very barren and depressing vision of Detroit, much of which includes a frightening and apocalyptic looking Michigan Central Depot and several dilapidated buildings in the city's Cass Corridor.

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"It was strange rehashing memories," said Watson, a former Southwestern High School coach who is now coaching men's basketball at the University of Detroit-Mercy. "I always worked to help young people by teaching old-school values -- work hard, save for a rainy day -- and here were these New Jack drug bosses who pushed a get-rich-quick philosophy. I lost a lot of young guys to the drug game, who either died or went to jail.

"Detroit has a bittersweet tale, but it's a tale worth telling."

'American Gangster'

10 tonight on BET

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**[Illustration]**

Billy Joe Chambers rose from poverty to run the streets of Detroit as a drug lord with his brothers.