



## The Dozens: A History of Rap's Mama

*Elijah Wald*

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## **The Dozens: A History of Rap's Mama** Elijah Wald

From Two Live Crew's controversial comedy to Ice Cube's gangsta styling and the battle rhymes of a streetcorner cypher, rap has always drawn on deep traditions of African American poetic word-play. In Talking 'Bout Your Mama, author Elijah Wald explores one of the most potent sources of rap: the viciously funny, outrageously inventive insult game known as "the dozens."

So what is the dozens? At its simplest, it's a comic chain of "yo' mama" jokes. At its most complex, it's an intricate form of social interaction that reaches back to African ceremonial rituals. Wald traces the tradition of African American street rhyming and verbal combat that has ruled urban neighborhoods since the early 1900s. Whether considered vernacular poetry, aggressive dueling, a test of street cool, or just a mess of dirty insults, the dozens is a basic building block of African-American culture. A game which could inspire raucous laughter or escalate to violence, it provided a wellspring of rhymes, attitude, and raw humor that has influenced pop musicians from Jelly Roll Morton and Robert Johnson to Tupac Shakur and Jay Z.

Wald goes back to the dozens' roots, looking at mother-insulting and verbal combat from Greenland to the sources of the Niger, and shows its breadth of influence in the seminal writings of Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston; the comedy of Richard Pryor and George Carlin; the dark humor of the blues; the hip slang and competitive jamming of jazz; and in its ultimate evolution into the improvisatory battling of rap. From schoolyard games and rural work songs to urban novels and nightclub comedy, and pop hits from ragtime to rap, Wald uses the dozens as a lens to provide new insight into over a century of African American culture.

A groundbreaking work, Talking 'Bout Your Mama is an essential book for anyone interested in African American cultural studies, history and linguistics, and the origins of rap music.

## **The Dozens: A History of Rap's Mama Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Dozens: A History of Rap's Mama for online ebook**

### **Matt says**

I picked up this book thinking it was going to focus on the Dozens's relationship to rap, but it did not do that. At all.

This is more of an academic look at the linguistics of insult battles, but Wald can often be found hedging any kind of concrete conclusions about the origins of certain stanzas or lines. It is not uncommon in the book to find qualifying lines like "It may be.." or "It is possible that..."

The book is also very slow reading. It's only 200 pages, but it feels much longer than that.

Given the slowness of the book, the wavering of the author, and the fact that only the last 15 pages of the book were dedicated to the Dozens's connection to rap, I wouldn't really suggest this book unless you have a serious interest in African American linguistic history.

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### **Marie Hew says**

I picked up this book thinking I'd get some prime yo mama jokes. This isn't it. Sure, there were some great examples of fine verbosity. However, they were samplings of the dozens put into historical, sociological and at times psychological context. This book is much more an academic exploration of a phenomenon that many have heard about on a superficial level. I appreciated a lot of the historical and social contextualization. Unfortunately, at times it read like a dissection of a joke. Dozens examples loses its punch when overly analyzed. Also, like the author states, you can't fully appreciate the dozens by reading about it. You have to experience it as a live exchange between two skilled, sharp witted players.

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### **Frank Taylor says**

Brings back childhood memories.

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### **Kasandra says**

Funny and interesting, with at least a few lines in it that you probably haven't heard before.... but also makes it clear how hard it is to authentically "track" the history of the dozens. Plenty of scholarship and research here, but it's definitely entertaining, even if the author can't come to any hard and fast conclusions.

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### **Tricia says**

I read about half of this and skimmed the other half. I like that the author states up-front that The Dozens is not part of his culture and that he is not trying to explain it, but since comprehensive documentation has never really been done on the subject, he wanted to try and pull together as much information as he could find. The main points of each chapter are really interesting, but then there is example after example, which sort of bogged things down for me and is why I ended up skimming a bit. Especially interesting to see how The Dozens has crossed over out of African American culture and the ways that it impacts things like music and stand-up comedy.

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### **Gayle says**

I came across a reference to "the dozens" in something I read and I was fascinated because I had never heard the term. [Probably because I'm an old white lady <:] This book is tracing a cultural phenomenon of a "game" played in a group, usually for a group, of throwing insults about a person's mama [or family] back and forth until one person is declared "winner." These games can be fun and humorous, but can also lead to physical violence. The author likens the game to jazz, as well as rap, and the history goes back to the early 20th century and vaudeville. Fascinating read!

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### **Jesse says**

Truly the best book ever on the pre-history, history, literary use of, musical recording of, phenomenology of, and everything else you could think of, of insulting people's mamas. Light-footed, funny, and scholarly, too. Pursues lots of different ideas of what they mean, includes multicultural insults (including people doing the deed in Turkish), and scholarship on the relation of folk to commercial culture. And since Wald knows a billion things about the old blues circuit (see his excellent book on Robert Johnson, hardly the untutored primitive 60s rockers made him out to be; as Wald notes, in the pictures we have of Johnson, he's wearing a suit), he can talk really smartly about what the early recordings of insult songs do and don't mean. Plus this sentence, which is one of the greatest sentences ever to be published by Oxford UP: "No one has attempted a serious historical insult mapping of the United States, whether by culture, ethnicity, or geography, and by now it may well be too late" (166). That would be one heck of a book, I think we can all agree.

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### **April says**

I agree with another good reads review that calls the book "often frustratingly dry, especially given the vibrantly raunchy subject matter."

The author is an academic & often uses words that I've never even heard of before, forget knowing their definition. For example, sequelae is used in the preface & lagniappe is used in the last chapter. I've since

looked up both words but I just skipped over many others. I like having a big vocabulary myself, but it just seemed extra obnoxious in the context of a book about the history of the dozens.

On the other hand the author clearly has a sense of humor & I think the book would have felt less like a bit of a slog & more like a terrific conversation if he'd let a bit more personality come through the pages & left the high-faluting language to academic journals.

If you get bored skip ahead & read chapter eleven "Why Do They (We) Do That?", a nice overview of various theories.

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### **Joe says**

It was entertaining and informative. Reminded me of my youth.

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### **Sonya says**

I enjoy everything the author writes! I could not wait to get into this book give yourself and hour or so uninterrupted once you get into it you will not stop his books just flow. This book was fascinating.

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### **Edna says**

Some of the best, most thoughtful non-fiction I've read in a long time.

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### **Vello says**

gave insight on the way we communicate as black men. Shows that nurturing is a trait in black men (like any men), but it expressed in a different way (could be considered harsh by some). I like that Wald wasn't pretentious in explaining the topic and gave multiple points of Views. I gotta agree tho it was a bit dry (given the topic).

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### **Jeff says**

Wald writes academically about aspects of American culture that aren't often afforded the treatment, which means he's doing important (and occasionally groundbreaking) work while never being quite as entertaining or engaging as his subjects would seem to warrant. This book is no different -- enlightening, but often frustratingly dry, especially given the vibrantly raunchy subject matter.

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## **Sheehan says**

Great scholarship on the history of the dozens...

The title is a bit misleading as Rap is discussed as about 5-10% of the total text, because the historical precedents are actually much more interesting rooting back into the Jazz era, the writing, the music, the survival strategy aspects of slipping into the dozens, of testing boundaries and affirming friendships and outing aggressors...just dope all around.

I grew up "talking shit" and "capping/clowning" my friends, talking up and down about their mothers in the most debased sexist, racist, juvenile and CREATIVE ways. You grew to know when too much was too much, and we all grew thick skins; and THAT kept us out of trouble with folks who "didn't know us like that..."

And one of the fondest memories of my high school years was when all these same clowns and I got our mothers together to cook them dinner one night, so they could all meet...there's no joke to this part it REALLY happened, and it was silly and we cooked a crappy meal you'd expect from a pack of 16/17 year olds. But our moms got to meet and hang out and feel loved because at the end of the day, no matter how many ways I put someone's mom on blast, I always knew in my heart they were someone's mama. It was an important and formative part of my adolescence and certainly frames all the talking I have to do at work in a way that keeps me from getting in fools faces.

The Dozens is an easily accessible academic book that really gets under the skin, check it out.

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## **Mike says**

Wald's always pleasurable reading. In-depth research, lots of laughs.  
Gave me repartee ideas for putting my wise-a.. buddies in their place.

notes:

--preface vii...choices made...preserve original language, even if sexist, racist, homophobic...etc... effective, objective handling of offensiveness....

4..1st written reference 1921, chris smith song (don't slip me in the dozens)

NBA standard trash talking

10..'47, black mocking "signifying songs" similar to African songs of derision  
....also, wa-wa trumpet in jazz & blues

15..interpretations: predatory bullying, or survival of an ancient African tradition

17..a way to feel important...most of us ain't goin' nowhere in this world, ain't goin' to do much better than we're doin' now

51-52..often used "c\*ck" to mean vulva, not penis (c-sucker can mean man performing cunnilingus)  
Ancient euphemism, abbrev. of "cockle", or scallop shell, symbol of female genitalia..goes back to Egypt cult of Isis & Roman cult of Venus..(Botticelli's Birth of Aphrodite)

67..nobody will know how ugly you is. Yo' ugliness is shrouded in mystery.

Hostility was an elaborate masquerade whereunder they concealed genuine affection.

68..Zora Hurston..avg southern child is raised on simile and invective. They know how to call names.  
(Mullet-headed, mule-eared, wall-eyed, hog-nosed,...)

71..Hurston short story...

----so ugly dey have to cover yo' face up at night so sleep can slip up on yo'  
----so ugly they could throw yo' in de Miss. River & skim ugly for 6 months  
----you heard her, you ain't blind

87..bo diddley's Say Man, 1959, his only top 20 pop hit

..Some of the lines in Hurston story 30 years previous

92..Snaps books

96..dick gregory developed his comedy skills with the dozens

center photos

--725 BC, Stela of Great Chief of...

"a donkey shall copulate with him, a donkey shall copulate with his wife, his wife shall copulate with his child."

121..ch 8: "Around the world with your Mother" Funny

187..yo' mama has so much hair under her arms, looks like she got Buckwheat in a headlock

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