

= It Was Written =

It Was Written is the second studio album by American rapper Nas , released July 2 , 1996 on Columbia Records in the United States . Following the moderate sales success of his acclaimed debut album , Illmatic (1994) , Nas chose to focus his efforts in a more mainstream direction . Primarily produced by Trackmasters , it is a departure for him from the raw , underground tone of his debut album towards a more polished , mainstream sound . The album features mafioso and gangsta themes , and marks the first appearance of Nas 's short @-@ lived supergroup The Firm , which included rappers Foxy Brown , AZ , and Cormega .

The album proved to be Nas 's most commercially successful release , debuting at number one on the US Billboard 200 chart . It also heralded Nas 's mainstream popularity and followed the success of other mafioso rap albums such as Raekwon 's Only Built 4 Cuban Linx ? (1995) . However , his stylistic changes and increased mainstream success fostered accusations of selling out within the hip hop community . It has been viewed by music writers as one of Nas 's best records and remains Nas ' best @-@ selling release , with over 4 million copies in the United States alone .

= = Background and recording = =

Following the critical acclaim of his debut album Illmatic (1994) , Nas chose to concentrate his efforts in a more mainstream direction , in contrast to the raw , unpolished and underground tone of his debut . Despite its significant impact on hip hop at the time , Illmatic did not experience the larger sales of most major releases at the time in hip hop , such as Snoop Dogg 's Doggystyle (1993) . This was due in part to Nas 's shy personality and uninvolved involvement in promoting the record . Nas began to make appearances on other artists ' work , including Kool G Rap 's " 4 @, @ 5 @, @ 6 " (1995) and Raekwon 's " Verbal Intercourse " on his album Only Built 4 Cuban Linx ? (1995) , which made Nas the first non Wu @-@ Tang Clan member to appear on one of its solo recordings . He began to dub himself as Nas Escobar on these guest appearances .

Meanwhile , his excessive spending habits left him with little money , and Nas was forced to ask for a loan to purchase clothes to wear to the Source Awards ceremony in 1995 . The success of fellow East Coast act The Notorious B.I.G. and promoter Puff Daddy at the awards show sent a message to Nas to change his commercial approach , resulting in his hiring of Steve " The Commissioner " Stoute as manager . While Illmatic attained gold status in the United States , Stoute convinced Nas to aim his efforts in a more mainstream , commercial direction for his second album , after which Nas enlisted the production team Trackmasters , who were known at the time for their mainstream success . Other producers for the album included DJ Premier , Dr. Dre , Havoc of Mobb Deep , L.E.S. , Live Squad , and MC Serch as executive producer . Premier and L.E.S. had previously served as producers for Nas 's Illmatic . The album was mastered by Tom Coyne at Sterling Sound in New York City . The album cover was designed by artist Aimée Macauley , and the photography was taken by Danny Clinch .

= = Composition = =

= = = Music and style = = =

In contrast to Illmatic , the album contains a more detailed and elaborate production , while it shares similarity to the G @-@ funk sound , relying heavily on sampled and looped funk grooves . It Was Written has Nas experimenting with a theatrical mafioso concept under the alias of " Nas Escobar " (inspired by the Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar) . The album 's subject matter has been noted for its focus on materialistic excess and other mafioso lyrical themes . Jon Pareles of The New York Times wrote of Nas 's shift in lyrical themes from Illmatic , stating he " repeatedly cites the Colombian drug kingpin Pablo Escobar and drops brand names of clothes , cars , liquor and guns . " Nas also references lines from his previous material , a common element in his music that has been

analyzed by one music writer as " return [ing] to his professional beginnings in those references . "

= = = Content = = =

The album opens with " Album Intro " in which a slave rebellion is heard , and it contains samples of Sam Cooke 's " A Change Is Gonna Come " (1964) and The Lost Generation 's " The Sly , the Slick , and the Wicked " (1970) . (sample) The opening song " The Message " features production by the Trackmasters , Poke & Tone , and scratching from Kid Capri . One critic described the song as a " bloody narrative " , and cited it as " one of the most visually evocative songs of Nas ' career " . The song 's title references the classic hip hop single " The Message " (1982) by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five . Legendary producer DJ Premier had one production credit on the jazz fusion @-@ styled " I Gave You Power " , a song which depicts a first @-@ person narrative from the perspective of a gun . The song is accompanied by falling piano notes and stuttering drums .

The album contains the singles " If I Ruled the World " , which features guest vocals from Lauryn Hill , and " Street Dreams " . Music critic J.R. Reynolds wrote that the former has Nas " rapping his way to anarchy in an imagined world where he kicks discipline to the curb and good times rule . " In the song , he states that he would " open every cell in Attica / send them to Africa " . The latter is an account on the impact of drugs in Nas 's neighborhood . The song contains smooth bass lines and frail drums , and it features an interpolation of the Eurythmics ' " Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This) " (1983) . The album also features guest appearances from Mobb Deep and The Firm , a supergroup which was initially composed of Nas , AZ , Cormega and Foxy Brown . The group makes an appearance on the song " Affirmative Action " , a tale of robbery and three characters with mob connections . Brett Berliner of Stylus Magazine described the song 's beat as " extremely mafioso , sounding straight out of Goodfellas , with strings and crescendos " , while he cited the song as " one of the best posse tracks of all time . "

Mobb Deep 's Havoc produced two tracks for the album , " The Set Up " , a story about revenge , and " Live Nigga Rap " , a freestyle performed by Nas and Mobb Deep with hard , gloomy percussion . " Black Girl Lost " is a sympathetic account on the struggle of African @-@ American women . It features vocals by R & B singer Joel " Jo @-@ Jo " Hailey of Jodeci . Music critic Krisex wrote of Nas 's lyricism , stating " The L.E.S.-produced song woos heavy rotation while the MC makes the type of passionate perusals that leave lyrical aficionadeos genuflecting at his mike stand . " The song 's title comes from the book of the same name by pulp writer Donald Goines ; his literary work has served as a popular source of reference for many gangsta rap artists . " Nas Is Coming " is a collaboration between Nas and West Coast rapper Dr. Dre . One writer cited it as " more of a gangsta , mainstream tune than anything Nas has ever recorded . " The song 's opening conversation , a skit , is a discussion between Nas and Dr. Dre about hip hop artists and fans over @-@ concerned with the East Coast @-@ West Coast rivalry , and that the two are producing a song that does not revolve around or contribute to the beef .

= = Reception = =

= = = Commercial performance = = =

It Was Written was released July 2 , 1996 in the United States , Canada and Europe on Columbia Records , while featuring distribution in the United Kingdom on Simply Vinyl Records as a double vinyl LP . It Was Written proved to be Nas 's most commercially successful album to date , selling 268 @, @ 000 copies at the time of its chart debut . It peaked at number one on the Top R & B / Hip @-@ Hop Albums and debuted at the top of the Billboard 200 , remaining on the latter chart at number one for four consecutive weeks , in the top 20 for eleven weeks , and a total of thirty @-@ four weeks in the top 200 .

The album 's first single " If I Ruled the World (Imagine That) " peaked at number 15 on the Hot Rap Singles chart , number 17 on the Hot R & B / Hip @-@ Hop Singles & Tracks chart and number

53 on the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart . The second single " Street Dreams " hit number one on the Hot Dance Music / Maxi @-@ Singles Sales chart , as well as number one on the Hot Rap Singles chart , while it peaked at number 18 on the Hot R & B / Hip @-@ Hop Singles & Tracks and number 27 on the Billboard Hot 100 . A remix version of " Street Dreams " was released on November 26 , 1996 featuring production by Poke & Tone and guest vocals from R & B singer R. Kelly . On September 6 , 1996 , It Was Written was certified double platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) , for shipments of two million copies in the United States . On January 8 , 1997 , " Street Dreams " was certified gold in sales by the RIAA for shipments of 500 @, @ 000 copies .

= = = Critical response = = =

It Was Written received generally positive reviews from critics . The Source called it an " audio anthology of ghetto stories told by one of hip @-@ hop 's most prolific writers . " Vibe magazine 's Krisex criticized the album 's " consistently aggressive attempts at pop music " , but also wrote that Nas " shines through " . Despite calling the album " adequate " and commending Nas for his lyricism and flow , Krisex concluded that It Was Written " isn 't nearly as satisfying as his first one . " NME wrote that " Nas ' neat , considered lyrics treat the violence that surrounds him with a mixture of remorse , resignation and ebullience . " Christopher John Farley of Time stated " The lyrics in It Was Written could be sharper , but the music , energetic and engaging on many tracks , helps drive his message home . " Q magazine called Nas 's performance " angry , lean and full of drive . " Both the Chicago Tribune and Chicago Sun @-@ Times were favorable of the album 's sound and gave the album 3 ½ out of 4 stars . Los Angeles Times writer Cheo Coker called the album " poetic " , writing that it " demonstrates a continuing lyrical maturity that makes his already potent beats and rhymes all the more compelling " . Spin magazine preferred the " reach " of It Was Written to Nas 's " more suavely rapped debut " , praised the production , and described the songs ' choruses as " grainy , pop @-@ savvy " .

The album 's release followed the commercial success of other mafioso @-@ themed rap albums with similar subject matter , including Raekwon 's Only Built 4 Cuban Linx ? (1995) , Jay @-@ Z 's Reasonable Doubt (1996) and AZ 's Doe or Die (1995) . Music writers criticized its mainstream , R & B and pop @-@ leaning sound , as well as the enlistment of a top production unit and popular guest artists . The album 's lyrics and themes were also poorly received and heavily dismissed as an attempt by Nas to follow the popularity of gangsta and mafioso rap . Rolling Stone 's Mark Coleman wrote negatively of Nas 's themes and called it " the latest blatant example of trashy tough @-@ guy talk " , writing " Certainly he strikes a note of creepy realism in his stories of heavyweight dealing and literally cutthroat competition . ' The Set Up ' , ' Shootouts ' and ' Affirmative Action ' [...] are chilling in their how @-@ many @-@ grams @-@ to @-@ a @-@ kilo detail and utter amorality . On ' Watch Dem Niggas ' , Nas cites as inspirations both the boxing coach Cus D 'Amato and the murderous drug lord Pablo Escobar . What is this guy thinking ? " . Jon Pareles of The New York Times commented that he " continually shifts perspective " and called it " late @-@ stage gangsta rap , starting to buckle under its own contradictions . " The Village Voice 's Robert Christgau gave the album a " neither " () rating , indicating " may impress once or twice with consistent craft or an arresting track or two . Then it won 't . "

The album was ranked number 41 in NME 's critics ' poll of 1996 , and Jim Farber of the New York Daily News named it the sixth best album of 1996 . German @-@ based magazine Spex ranked it number four on its " End of Year " list , while the UK @-@ based magazine The Face named it the twenty @-@ fourth best album of 1996 . " If I Ruled the World (Imagine That) " was ranked number 29 on NME 's Singles of the Year list , and number 20 on The Village Voice 's Pazz & Jop critics ' poll . It was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Rap Solo Performance in 1997 .

= = = Retrospect = = =

Since its release , It Was Written remains Nas ' best @-@ selling release to date . By 2001 , it had

sold more than 2 @. @ 13 million copies . Leo Stanley of Allmusic later praised Nas 's lyricism and ghetto @-@ themed vignettes , along with the album 's detailed production . For Stylus Magazine 's On Second Thought publication , critic Brett Berliner re @-@ examined the album , discussing its initial impact , and cited it as " one of the first hip @-@ hop albums to straddle the critical and commercial divide successfully . " While comparing It Was Written to Illmatic , Berliner stated " It ? s a seriously good album with a bit of filler , worth of almost all of the praise Illmatic got . This is Nas ? second classic , and should be considered one of the best albums of all time . " About.com later ranked " If I Ruled the World (Imagine That) " number 24 on its list of 50 Great Hip Hop Songs , while it also named the song the fourth best R & B / Rap Collaboration .

While later reviews of the album saw It Was Written in a different light than previous reviews had , the subject matter was still seen as a major flaw of the album . Music critics perceived Nas ' violent , fantastical mafioso stories as lacking the emotion and truthfulness of his debut album . Writer Joe Katz wrote in a review of the album for Sputnikmusic , stating " The lyrics were there , but some of the emotion was gone . Maybe it was the world around Nas changing , or maybe it was changing in himself , but no one can listen to this after Illmatic and not see a change ... If Illmatic was the kind of nightmare you can 't wake up from and don 't really want too , then IWW is a regular dream , not quite " real " but enjoyable all the same . " While Illmatic is often held as Nas 's magnum opus , It Was Written was not only perceived by critics as part of a sophomore jinx , but was also the first of Nas 's subsequent work to be heavily judged and compared to the former . However , It Was Written has been noted as his commercial breakthrough by critics , as it boosted the rapper 's image in the mainstream and helped attract a much larger fan @-@ base .

= = Legacy and influence = =

= = = Controversy = = =

" Nas is Coming " began a brief collaboration between Nas and West Coast hip hop producer Dr. Dre . The alliance also resulted in the formation of The Firm , who make their debut on track number eight , " Affirmative Action " . The pairing of the East Coast rapper and the West Coast producer , during the period of the East Coast @-@ West Coast rivalry , brought criticism from both sides . More controversy ensued when , during the recording of The Firm 's album , Cormega was fired from the group by Nas 's manager , Steve Stoute , and replaced with a young rapper named Nature . Cormega recorded an underground single , " Fuck Nas and Nature " , which began a rivalry with Nas that persisted ? with brief periods of reconciliation ? to the end of 2005 .

In addition , West Coast @-@ based rapper Tupac Shakur took offense to the opening line of the song " The Message " , and in retaliation insulted Nas on a song titled " Against All Odds " from his posthumously @-@ released album The Don Killuminati : The 7 Day Theory (1996) . In an interview for King magazine , Nas later confirmed that the song was intended as a diss towards The Notorious B.I.G. , with the line " There 's one life , one love , so there can only be one King . " Nas and Shakur eventually met and reconciled prior to the latter 's fatal shooting . As a result of his death , Shakur did not have the opportunity to remove the insults to Nas in " Against All Odds " on The 7 Day Theory .

= = = Hip hop artists = = =

It Was Written has been credited , along with Raekwon 's Only Built 4 Cuban Linx ? (1995) , with helping usher in the era of the mafioso rap . According to writer Sam Chennault , while the hip hop subgenre would " run out of steam quickly , this release is a gem . " Chennault also discussed the significance of It Was Written during the period of its release , stating " after mastering stark street corner realism on Illmatic , Nas delivered a loose concept album that was , at the time , groundbreaking in its scope , approach and execution . " According to rapper Young Noble , a close friend of Tupac Shakur , the song " I Gave You Power " served as the main inspiration for Shakur 's

" Me and My Girlfriend " (1996) . American hip hop artist Lupe Fiasco has cited It Was Written as his favorite album and his primary source of inspiration . Fiasco has stated that he based his debut album Food & Liquor (2006) on the conceptual style and " moods " of It Was Written . When asked of his musical influences in an interview with AllHipHop.com , Fiasco stated " You know I really tried to go back and recreate [Nas ?] It Was Written , you know what I 'm saying like that ? [I would play] It Was Written and then I would play my album , and it was like , ? Do we got [this] record , do we got that record ? ? " When asked in an interview with NobodySmiling.com about why he is comfortable admitting the album as a source of inspiration , Fiasco stated :

Cause it ? s a classic . Like , people study @-@ you study the masters , you know what I ? m saying ? Everybody that ? s rapping studied someone to learn how to rap . They had a rapper who was they favorite rapper that they wanted to be like and wanted to rap like , know what I ? m saying ? For me , I just look at it like I studied a master piece . I modeled my album after a master piece ; and not song for song ; not line for line ; not beat for beat . It was more @-@ for me it was like mood for mood . The way he set the mood on that album to me was just like incredible . And at the time in my life @-@ like , I fell in love with ? It Was Written ? when I was seventeen , eighteen @-@ a very impressionable time @-@ so I was like I love that album . That ? s my favorite Hip Hop album , so it ? s like why not base your album on ? It Was Written ? ?

American reggae and hip hop artist Matisyahu regards It Was Written as one of his influences as well . He cites the introduction of It Was Written , in which slaves rebel against their owner , as having a major influence on him . According to The Washington Post , " Matisyahu , too , felt enslaved . By what ? He didn 't know . Just felt the chains . The lyrics rocked him . The beat did , too . " Matisyahu stated that after listening to It Was Written , " I connected with hip @-@ hop , the hardness of it , the driving beat . It ? s music with space , that has gaps in every little thing that happens . "

= = = Subsequent work by Nas = = =

While It Was Written earned a more favorable reputation among critics since its initial mixed reception , Nas 's subsequent releases have continued to be weighed against his critically acclaimed Illmatic , despite all of them outselling his debut . Against this standard , they have often been critically deemed as mediocre follow @-@ ups . It Was Written was the first of Nas 's albums to have been labeled as ' selling out ' by fans of Illmatic , due to his crossover sensibilities and radio @-@ friendly hits aimed at the pop charts . In addition , none of his following releases have been able to reach the sales success of It Was Written . The follow @-@ up , I Am ? (1999) , fared almost as well as It Was Written , serving as Nas 's only other album to reach double platinum status . After the releases of I Am ? and Nastradamus (1999) , which underwent considerable editing due to bootlegging of the recording sessions , many fans and critics feared that his career was deteriorating . Despite the chart @-@ topping success of I Am ? , hip hop audiences were not ready for the more prophetic themes of Nastradamus , as it only sold 232 @,@ 000 copies by its first week (less than half of I Am ? 's first @-@ week figures) .

By 2001 , Illmatic and It Was Written were both selling at a rate of over 3 @,@ 000 copies a week , while Nastradamus was earning an average of little more than 2 @,@ 000 copies a week , despite its relative newness . Both I Am ? and Nastradamus received further criticism for their commercially oriented sound . Reflecting this widespread perception in the hip hop community and adding to his ongoing feud with Jay @-@ Z at the time , Jay @-@ Z mocked him in the song " Takeover " (2001) for assuming a " Pablo Escobar " persona and having a " one hot album [Illmatic] every ten year average " . Nas , however , made something of a comeback with his fifth album Stillmatic (2001) and the follow @-@ up God 's Son (2002) , which both sold in excess of 1 million copies . Afterwards , his subsequent albums tended to receive more positive reviews , including the platinum @-@ selling Street 's Disciple (2004) and his untitled ninth album (2008) . Nevertheless , It Was Written has remained as Nas 's best @-@ selling album .

= = Track listing = =

= = Personnel = =

= = Charts = =

= = = Chart procession and succession = = =