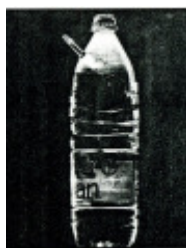


“Crack & ruin” / Time Out / 28 March 1997



(with Julian Kossoff)

We've all read tabloid horror stories about crack wars in our inner cities, but just how close are they to the truth? Under cover of darkness, with an addict for our guide, we sought - and bought - crack on the streets of Brixton.

It is dusk. On the eighth floor of a tower block above the Elephant and Castle, Darcus holds his breath, a lighter in one hand, a bottle of water with a hollowed-out pen sticking out of the side in the other. He holds the flame to the bottle top covered in perforated silver foil, sprinkled with ash and crumbled fragments of crack cocaine. He places the pen tube to his lips and draws hard. Milky white clouds roll into the belly of the bottle.

Darcus draws again, harder. It takes six seconds for his body to respond as the cocaine compound roars through his central nervous system. As Darcus feels the rush, he stands up to experience the full force of the crack now tearing through his veins. His lips are still stuck to the pipe, he is licking the pipe, eyes closed in ecstasy, his tall, athletic frame swaying gently from side to side.

He takes a long time to exhale, smiles, and sits on the bed, a mattress-cum-disorderly pile of personal detritus, where during the day he sweat off the effects of the rock and watches a black-and-white portable TV. Straight, Darcus is a likeable, intelligent guy, hardly the typical crackhead portrayed by the media. Crack changes his temperament; it makes him more introverted, a bit snappy.

“Some people go pretty nasty on crack,” he says, his quiet, Home Counties voice struggling to maintain normality. “I’ve seen people knifed. A girl I know got buggered when her dealer was out of it. I’ve been mugged for my stuff. But most people just go into themselves, right inside where no-one else can get to.”

Darcus looks like he wants to retreat, too, into his shell. But instead he tells us about the effects of crack cocaine on his body and mind- and on his pocket. Darcus used to earn big money when he inhabited the ‘normal’ world. Now he just spends it.

His studio flat is sparse and drab, especially at night. Some drunks tried to fight us on our way upstairs. Through the window there is a view of more tower blocks and low-rise concrete blocks; peeking above the dystopia are the Gothic spires of London Bridge. But crackheads don’t ponder vistas, any pauses in their drug abuse are spent ‘carpet cruising’- searching the floor for tiny crystals which may have escaped their pleasure. “I’m in the music business.” He uses the present tense, although he hasn’t worked for months. He names some big names, which later check out. Then he got into drugs.

“I started with spliff, booze, the usual. There was a lot of E around. I started acid with E, for a bigger high. Then someone gave me some crack, and I never looked back.” Last year, he says, he spent £10,000 on drugs, and the last time he was gainfully employed he spent most of his time licking the pipe in the company toilet.

“Crack cocaine isn’t good for you, and is highly addictive. You buzz for ten minutes, like you wouldn’t believe. It’s like poppers (amyl nitrate), but more so. A lot, lot more. It’s wicked for sex, bad for socialising. But then it’s gone, and you want more.”

There are plenty of places to buy crack cocaine. With Darcus as our guide, we criss-cross Brixton visiting a newsagent, a takeaway, a book-maker, a men’s hairdressers and a street full of pushers. At each location, crack is available. The places are five minutes from each other, less than that from Brixton police station. And the trade is thriving.

The newsagent, close to where Chris “Tuffy” Bourne, crack dealer and leading member of the

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notorious Shower Posse died in a hail of bullets in 1993, doesn't seem to stock much. The shelves are bare. A couple of weary-looking pasties sit behind glass. No papers seem to be on sale. But the two young blacks behind the counter have found better returns in crack. They glower at us. Darcus reassures them.

Five minutes' walk away, a sign says “Fresh food Take-Away-Caribbean Cuisine”. There's no menu; everyone knows what's on it. The first time we went, there was no food; the second time, just a few scrag-ends of chicken. The only hunger this place satisfies is the craving for crack.

Three young black men are barricaded behind the counter, perspex screens with small, bank-like holes through which to pass merchandise. They are not happy when Darcus walks in with someone they have never seen before. They growl menacingly. “What you doin', bringing whitey police in here?” They grimace and kiss their teeth. Darcus wants two twenty pound wraps. One of the dealers opens his palm and is holding 30 rocks, each the size of a pea, bundled up in cellophane, two of which he agrees to sell.

Darcus says he will be staying out of their way for a week or two. “Dealers man, they're all paranoid. But when they're on crack, they're a lot worse. You have to get your face known man, turn up with a rough looking woman. After a few days, you're in.” These 'rough looking women', as Darcus calls them, are usually prostitutes. 'They do a punter for £20, go smoke £20 of crack, and they're out on the streets again looking for another £20.'

Darcus is 'in' at a few local crack houses as well. We go to a quiet, respectable looking street. He shows us an anonymous looking house where large scale crack dealing is going on.

“That's where I got jumped man, coming out of there. It was 7am, I'd got the last wrap, and this other guy wanted it. He jumped on me. I lost my jacket, but I still had the wrap.”

Even on the busy Coldharbour Lane, dealers are ready to trade. Catch the eye of one of the big guys in outsized puffa jackets and they will mutter the introduction: “I'm a rude bwoy”, and offer to sell you super skunk (a powerful form of herbal cannabis), as a prelude to their other wares.

Most of the drugs sold on the street are 'bent'. Darcus reckons only 10 per cent of the product is really what is claimed. You have got to be stupid or desperate to try and score on Coldharbour Lane.

Everything sold has a strict 'no- money-back guarantee' and indeed, many of the so-called pushers are themselves crackheads, violent when strung out, looking to roll a sucker.

In another take-away - one that does sell food and drinks - we sip pineapple punch and watch what passes for life go by. “Livin' in the gangsta paradise... I'm 23 now, don't know if I'll make 24...”

Coolio's lyrics resonate like thunder as yet another BMW with tinted windows cruises past. A hard-faced woman walks in wearing a big coat with the slogan “Zero Zero” on the back. “I've bought from her,” whispers Darcus. A skinny white woman in a ridiculously short dress totters down the street.

“She's off it (on crack) man,” says Darcus sadly. “She once asked to do a trick for me at 6am. She said she'd do it for £5, I said I was skint, so she said £3. I only had £1., and she said she'd do something for that!”

We move down to the Dog Star pub in Coldharbour Lane, formerly the notorious Atlantic, now tartered up as a watering-hole for South London's white bohemians. The contrast, from downtown South Central LA into a room full of white middle-class wannabes, is startling. Darcus is one of just a handful of black people inside.

But, according to Darcus, even the Dog Star's “in” crowd could be potential crackies. “You get allsorts using crack,” he says, “all classes, all ages. Even white middle- aged villains are on it.” Indeed, as older drug aficionados will tell you, crack is really only the bastardised son of freebase cocaine, which was fashionable in the early “80s among London's clique of high- living low-life. One 40-year-old former user remembers the rich kids, who would spend thousands of pounds in all-night freebasing marathons in expensive pads in Maida Vale and Belsize Park, only finally to implode due to cocaine-induced psychosis. At this point, their wealthy families would step in and book them into private rehab clinics. There's no such safety net for the likes of Darcus. Historically, the Health Service's treatment of drug

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addicts focuses on opiate abusers. A heroin addicts' withdrawal can be soothed with the legal substitute, methadone. When broken-down crack addicts started turning up at London drug units, doctors and counsellors were at a loss as to how to help them. “One of the problems is that there is no crack substitute and crack users are a lot less pliant than heroin addicts,” said Harry Shapiro of the Institute for the Study of Drug Dependency. A handful of drug projects are now trying to catch up with the problem.

Back at his crack den, Darcus tells us some of the stories that are part of crack mythology. Like many urban myths, most have their basis in reality. Crack addicts do mug people to fuel their habit. Jungle music and crack are inextricably linked, like dance music and ecstasy. And there is a growing urban underclass who will do anything to keep high.

But the one that causes the most discomfort is the issue of race. Much has been reported about the crack distribution networks, generally controlled by Jamaican gangs - so-called Yardies - which constantly teeter on the edge of internecine wars as their business takes root in pockets of the inner city. Brixton, Peckham, Dalston, Shepherd's Bush, Notting Hill, King's Cross, Tottenham, Kilburn, Harlesden - you can go to the newsagent for your lottery ticket, put a bet in a horse, go to the pub, get a take-away, call a mini-cab firm, and in each place you can also buy a wrap of crack.

“It's definitely damaging the black community, it's suppressing them, turning one against one another,” says Darcus.

“Chicago? LA? If you see some of the crimes these kids are committing we're there already,” said a youth worker in Brixton. “They have access to guns, some are into sadistic kinds of crimes.”

John Davison is the author of a new book on Yardie gun culture, ‘Gangsta’. “It is the black community that has seen its youth taken by guns, drugs or the gangstas. What is needed is an honest admission of the problem by the Government and police, and concerted action to address it. At present, they seem to be saying that black-on-black crime is a low priority,” he said.

The Met has been criticised for a crack policy that zig-zags wildly, setting up special operations one year, and then closing them the next. A strategy of using informers backfired when the Jamaican gangstas supposedly working for the police went on murderous crime rampages. But the constant battles between rival gangs mean that the crack dealers are effectively policing themselves, constantly arguing, fighting and killing each other over turf.

Despite the obviousness of their activity, the dance-hall shootings and the open dealing, the gangstas' reign of terror is limited to the black communities. For all the macho-posturing and gun play of the Jamaican “dons”, they are in fact only colourful bit-players in the multi-million-pound cocaine trade. The king-pins are the business-like British villains, who have links to Italian and Colombian organisations, and crave respectable anonymity to avoid the attention of the authorities.

London does have a problem, but the warning of a crack deluge issued by San Francisco detective Robert Stutman, at a UK press conference in 1989, was, with hindsight, an exaggeration.

“Crack has found a level within the drug scene but it's not an epidemic, and where it has taken hold in the inner city it is causing major problems. Mercifully, the worst-case scenarios have not been realised,” said Shapiro. Surveys of drug use show that it is still lagging well behind other Class A drugs in popularity, with no more than 3 per cent of drug-users having tried it.

“It's the self-destructive drug,” admits Darcus, from the relative comfort of his shabby flat. “A lot of people know it. They aren't stupid. They're just unemployed, bored, skint or looking for excitement. They're people on the edge. Crack can push them over it.” With that, Darcus starts to build another pipe.

Ends