

Rapper Coolio dead at 59

Nick Barrickman
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Rapper and entertainer Coolio (born Artis Leon Ivey Jr. in 1963) was pronounced dead September 28 after collapsing in a friend's bathroom in Los Angeles, California.

According to the tabloid *TMZ*, “paramedics were called to a house in Los Angeles around 4 PM for a medical emergency and when they got there they pronounced Coolio dead.” According to Jarez Posey, the entertainer's manager, the cause of death was cardiac arrest. No foul play is suspected.

Coolio's website estimates that the rapper-actor-entertainer sold nearly 17 million records throughout the world. He is best known for a string of successful album singles during the mid-to-late 1990s.

The rapper, who began to garner fame near the end of the “gangster rap” era in the early 1990s, is notable for his ability to appeal to wider audiences outside of the subgenre with lighter “party anthems,” which did not fully relinquish the rap genre's harder edge.

Ivey-Coolio was born in the Pittsburgh suburb of Monessen, Pennsylvania, still a steelmaking center at the time, before his family moved to the West Coast to settle in Compton, California. After releasing his first single in 1987, the rapper, by then in his mid-20s, began to struggle with drug addiction, a difficulty that would plague him throughout life.

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 1994, the rapper explained that he took to volunteer firefighting as a way to remove himself from his drug habit. “I wasn't looking for a career, I was looking for a way to clean up—a way to escape the drug thing,” he explained. “In firefighting training was discipline I needed. We ran every day. I wasn't drinking or smoking or doing the stuff I usually did.”

In 1991, Coolio-Ivey joined the Compton-based group WC and the Maad Circle. The group, whose name stood for “Minority Alliance of Anti-Discrimination,” released two albums. The first, *Ain't a Damn Thang Changed* (1991, Priority), was heavily influenced by the black nationalist “political rap” of Public Enemy, Ice

Cube and others.

In 1994, Coolio's solo career was launched with the album *It Takes a Thief* (Tommy Boy). While the rapper appears to rework themes made redundant by the early-1990s wave of gangster rap, Coolio-Ivey's music is notable for its humorous, self-deprecating songs.

According to *All Music*, despite “his nods to hardcore, [Coolio's] music was clearly more happy-go-lucky at heart.” His most well-known songs “shared the West Coast scene's love of laid-back ‘70s funk,” and perhaps exceeded his peers in the amount that his music borrowed from the genre.

This is best seen on “Fantastic Voyage,” the breakout single of his debut album. It showcases the essential characteristics of Coolio's musical persona: the dance floor-oriented production (borrowing heavily from the 1980s Lakeside funk hit of the same title) and the rapper's easy-going, slightly offbeat personality. The latter was punctuated by his wildly braided hair “that stuck straight out of his head in all directions” (*All Music*).

The rapper reached the pinnacle of his musical success on his second album, 1995's *Gangsta's Paradise*. The album's title track features the now-iconic string section, taken from Stevie Wonder's 1976 song “Pastime Paradise,” interspersed with the assertive West Coast “G Funk” trademark snare and kick drum.

Ivey's opening lyrics are moving:

As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death

I take a look at my life and realize there's nothin' left

'Cause I've been blazin' and laughin' so long, that

Even my mama thinks that my mind is gone.

Ivey would later note that the opening lines to the song

were done impromptu, “and then I wrote the whole rest of the song without stopping, from the first verse to the third verse... ‘Gangsta’s Paradise’ wanted to be born; it wanted to come to life, and it chose me as the vessel.”

The song, prominently featured in the 1996 film *Dangerous Minds*, would go on to win a Grammy Award for Best Solo Rap Performance the same year. The album would be nominated for Best Rap Album in 1997.

The treatment of the “hard” subject matter of “Gangsta’s Paradise”—gang violence—revealed the limitations from which Ivey and countless other rap artists suffered. Ivey, despite the relatively reflective character of the music, cannot offer the slightest hope or prospect that solutions exist for the vast social decay in the United States’ inner cities. This is expressed by the song’s final words, “I know my life is out of luck, fool.”

The fatalism and demoralization was in part a response to what the *World Socialist Web Site* described in a review of *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) as the capitalist “counter-offensive against the working class begun by the Carter administration [that] picked up full steam under Ronald Reagan [in the 1980s],” the period in which Ivey came of age.

“In Southern California,” the WSWS wrote, “the auto industry shed thousands of jobs in the 1980s (the last auto plant in the region closed in 1992), along with the aerospace and defense industries. The simmering popular anger would erupt in Los Angeles in a major riot in April 1992 after the acquittal of police officers in the savage beating of Rodney King.”

The social, cultural and ideological climate was plagued by “capitalist triumphalism eventually associated with the collapse of the Stalinist regimes, worship of the ‘free market’ and the celebration of the most rancid forms of individualism.”

In addition to this, “The official civil rights movement, once animated by the ideals of political and, to a certain degree, social equality, had degenerated by the mid-1980s into the promotion of identity politics, ‘black capitalism’ and the elevation of a small layer of black businessmen and political figures into positions of power.”

Ivey-Coolio’s struggled to find a healthy outlook and orientation within this broader framework. His pivot away from overt gangsterism towards light-hearted “party music” was only a less antisocial expression of the genre’s general trend and did little to orient the rapper or anyone else to these broader social developments.

There is an irony in Ivey-Coolio’s turn toward the synthesizer-heavy funk melodies of Parliament-

Funkadelic and other 1970s bands. Parliament, begun in 1967 by George Clinton (born 1941, Kannapolis, North Carolina) and several doo-wop musicians, grew to become a significant musical force in the early 1970s, combining a diverse multi-racial and genre-bending roster of funk musicians over the course of its existence.

In 1989, Clinton explained the motivation behind the band’s 1972 album, *America Eats its Young*, stating: “The Vietnam war was happening when I made that album. It was about the heroin in Vietnam. That whole war was about heroin. The Golden Triangle... But this album also reminds me of what’s happening NOW!” Sadly, little of this social anger and opposition found its way into Ivey’s own music.

Following this success, Ivey-Coolio’s career began a descent. The rapper’s third album, *My Soul* (1997, Priority), managed to reach gold status according to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) largely due to the success of the single “C U When U Get There.”

According to *All Music*, despite the “elegiac” single’s intelligent lyrics and catchy chorus, the song was “one of the lowest-profile platinum hits of the year.”

The rapper’s attempts to remain relevant were increasingly marred by run-ins with the law, drug issues and other bizarre antics. Though Coolio released five more albums over the course of the next decade, he is most remembered at that point in his career for cameo appearances on sitcoms and reality TV shows. According to CNN, sadly, the rapper adapted to becoming “a nostalgic figure” in pop culture.

Though Ivey was a talented rapper-vocalist who by many accounts maintained a considerable degree of humility, despite his brush with fame in the 1990s, he was unfortunately ill-equipped to make much of value in the retrograde social and cultural atmosphere in which he found himself. That would have required a stronger artistic and social vision.



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