It is the fall of 1999, and I am beginning graduate studies in sociology at the University of Kansas when I land a part-time job writing for *The Mag*. *The Mag* is an arts-and-entertainment weekly published by the *Lawrence Journal-World*, the local newspaper in Lawrence, Kansas. *The Mag* is included as an insert to the daily paper each Friday and also has standalone distribution in Lawrence and some nearby cities.

*The Mag* is a small operation staffed by one full-time writer-editor and a handful of freelancers. There is a movie critic, restaurant reviewer, and scribe who covers the theater scene. I am hired to write about music. For $6 per hour, I am assigned to produce three music-related pieces each week, a combination of feature stories, editorials, and reviews. On my first day, I conduct a phone interview with Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson from the Roots. For me, a lifelong musician, music geek, and concertgoer, it is a dream job.

Lawrence is a classic Midwestern college town located about an hour’s drive west of Kansas City, Missouri, and renowned for its music scene. In its early-1990s heyday, downtown Lawrence was a bustling entertainment district—home to restaurants, cafés, record stores, head shops, used booksellers, and more.
twenty live-music venues. With thirty thousand fun-loving college students just steps away, the streets of downtown Lawrence were flooded each weekend with music lovers who would club hop to catch their favorite local acts. Lawrence rock bands such as Baghdad Jones, the L.A. Ramblers, and the Salty Iguanas were practically stars, selling out shows, signing autographs, and moving stacks of CDs in local stores.

By 1992, with grunge ascending, Lawrence’s music scene had become so well-known that *Rolling Stone* predicted it would become one of the country’s “next Seattles.” Lawrence alt-rock bands that inked major-label record deals during this era included Stick (Arista) and Tenderloin (Warner Brothers). Local heroes Kill Creek landed a contract with feted indie label Mammoth. But no Lawrence band soared higher than Paw, a Pearl Jam soundalike that signed to A&M Records and scored a national hit with its 1993 song, “Jessie.”

Grunge peaked in the mid-1990s, followed by the rise of gangsta rap and then boy bands and Britney as the millennium approached. By 1999, the internet, video games, and hundreds of cable TV channels were competing with live entertainment, and guitar-based music scenes like Lawrence’s were beginning to dry up.

Still, Lawrence, at the turn of the century, is populated by members of uber-cool emo act the Get Up Kids and successful transplants, such as California psychedelic-rock band the Appleseed Cast. A Lawrence-based alt-rock trio, Frogpond, has an album out with Columbia Records, and the lead singer from alt-rock quintet the Anniversary is dating actress Chloë Sevigny, fresh off an Oscar-nominated performance in *Boys Don’t Cry*.

In 1999, downtown Lawrence remains home to about a dozen venues that host a mix of national, regional, and local acts.
“The Lawrence music scene emerged as one of the great college music breeding grounds of the early 1990s,” says Jon Niccum, a Lawrence-based writer who has covered film and music in the region for three decades. “By 2000, the luster of live original music had worn off nationally. Yet Lawrence was still going strong, boasting clubs that showcased local and touring artists. It wasn’t exactly Seattle of 1991, but for a non-metropolis in the middle of a ‘flyover state,’ it was undeniably thriving. And the bands were damn good, too.”

As the lone music journalist for Lawrence’s newspaper, I cover it all. On December 7, 1999, I am assigned to review a concert by U-God, an original member of one of rap’s most celebrated groups, the Wu-Tang Clan. U-God is performing at the Bottleneck, a 350-patron stalwart of Lawrence’s live music scene known for booking acts like Radiohead and Marilyn Manson long before they were famous.

My review of U-God’s performance will be published in the daily newspaper the morning after next, and I have a hard 2:00 a.m. deadline. That means that I have to attend the concert, take notes, go home, write a review, and email it to the paper, all within a few hours. I am on the Bottleneck’s guest list plus-one; Greg, a buddy from grad school, tags along. As we arrive, the opening act is already onstage.

Greg and I make our way to the bar, find two empty stools, and sit down. My music-journalism gig has turned me into a semiregular at the Bottleneck, and I am friendly with the staff. As I chat with one of the bartenders, Greg watches the opener, engrossed.

A minute later, he taps me on the shoulder. “These guys are pretty good. Check them out.” I am assigned to write a review of U-God, the headliner, but Greg is right. The opening act is something special.
Pressed together on the Bottleneck’s small stage, four MCs operate as a cohesive unit. They trade rhymes effortlessly, playing off one another and finishing each other’s lines with the familiarity of old married couples. Their performance is as physical as it is verbal. The MCs trade up and tag the next rapper like prizefighters spinning and sparring in the ring. Before one MC’s line is finished, the next rapper has already been shoved to the front of the stage, taking over for a few bars before falling back and letting the next MC have a turn. The group members look and sound like stars who have been doing this their entire lives.

Greg and I are not the only ones who appreciate the performance. The audience presses toward the stage, arms swaying in unison, shouting along with every word like something out of a movie. As the song thunders to a close, one of the MCs steps up and introduces the next number. “This is our most controversial joint,” he asserts in a gravelly tone as a slow-crawling drum beat kicks in.

The backing tracks to rap songs are sometimes mini works of art, with samples, effects, and instruments chopped up and layered into soundscapes that serve as their own form of musical expression and commentary. By contrast, this group’s approach is positively minimalist. A sparse beat pounds like a slap to the face, closely accompanied by a rolling bass line with a couple of airy piano notes floating over the top. Sonically, there is almost as much open space as there is sound.

The MC continues his introduction, speaking in time with the beat. “This is the song that almost got us banned from the radio,” he intones. “This is the song that almost got us blacklisted. This is ‘Niggaz.’”

In unison, the four MCs shout, “Nigga, who is you?”

Stu “Str8jakkett” Tidwell is lean, muscular, and square-jawed. He wears baggy blue jeans over tan Timberland boots, topped
off by a loose white T-shirt and a dark knit cap affixed tightly
to his skull. The sparse instrumentation and lack of sonic dis-
tractions direct the listener’s attention toward the MC, fore-
grounding his lyrics and delivery almost entirely. Stu rhymes in a
staccato patter—short, sharp bursts of machine-gun fire—each
word enunciated so precisely that you can make out every syl-
lable, even as the words fly by at light speed.

Stu finishes his verse, takes a step back, and the next MC
strides into the spotlight.

“Nigga, who is you?” the group asks in unison.

Daymond “D.O.P.E” Douglas looks more like a movie star
than a rapper, even in sweatpants and a plain white T-shirt. He
is an energetic, visceral performer, bobbing and weaving like a
boxer and waving his hands like he’s stranded on a desert island,
flagging down an airplane. As Daymond raps his verse, the other
three MCs stay engaged, adding backup vocals to certain words
or phrases and pantomiming the lyrics with hand signs and ges-
tures. They listen and interject.

Daymond finishes, and the rest of the group cries, “Nigga,
who is you?” the audience now joining in the chant.

At twenty-two, De’Juan “DL” Knight is the youngest member
of the band; he could have easily passed for eighteen. Like the
rest of the group, De’Juan has striking features that draw the eye.
He is dark-skinned and physically sculpted, with hair that frays
upward in all directions like a firecracker caught mid-explosion.
He completes the image with a prison-issue neon orange T-shirt
that can be seen from the back of the club. De’Juan opens with
a line about being placed on intensive supervised probation, and
the knowing look in his eye makes it clear he’s writing nonfiction.

In addition to the group’s committed performance, I am
struck by the lack of musical conventions. The song, “Niggaz
(1137),” does not follow a traditional structure. It features no hook
or chorus, zero variation in the background music, and the MCs do not rap for equal amounts of time. The rhymes are meticulously written, but the format is akin to a cipher—bar upon bar of hard-punching rhymes without timekeeping or distraction. This relentless approach creates an almost hypnotic effect.

“Nigga, who is you?” the entire venue thunders as the last MC glides to the forefront. Barry “Killa the Hun” Rice is dressed in dark gray sweatpants and fresh pair of Nikes. He sports a white tank top that shows off numerous tattoos covering his muscular arms. He wears a diamond earring in each lobe, a thick gold watch, a strawberry-sized pinky ring on his right hand, and a long gold chain with a diamond-encrusted medallion of the Crucifixion that swings from the end. Microphone in his right hand, gesturing with his left, Barry introduces himself with a gravelly twang that splits the difference between the bayou and the Ozarks.

The quartet concludes their set to thunderous applause and departs the stage. I scrawl furiously in my rectangular reporter’s notebook. I’ve already decided to praise the group in my concert review. I also want to know how to get ahold of their recordings. In 1999, instant access to music is limited. Broadband technology has just begun to penetrate the United States, and internet service is not yet widespread. At the time, even cell phones are relatively rare, and smartphones will not appear for nearly a decade. There is no YouTube, no Facebook, no Twitter, no Instagram. Even MySpace and Friendster are years away. Napster, which facilitates MP3 file-sharing, debuted in June but is just beginning to gain traction and features mostly top-selling acts.

Given their level of talent, stage presence, and memorable songs, I assume the band I just saw is a New York act touring the country with U-God. I ask the bartender if he knows
their name, and he tells me the group is DVS Mindz, which he pronounces “devious minds.” I am surprised when he adds that DVS Mindz is from Topeka, Kansas’s maligned capital city, twenty miles west of Lawrence. He points me in the direction of the band’s manager, Randy, who is standing with the group in the wings of the stage.

I walk over and introduce myself, but the club is so loud it’s difficult to have a conversation. I shout something to Randy about reviewing the concert and ask him to write down his number in my notebook.

By the time U-God makes his way to the stage thirty minutes later, it is too late. The Wu-Tang Clan member’s one-man show is no match for the four-way frenzy that just took place. Having exhausted its energy on the opening act, the crowd now stands there, listless as U-God strains to light a spark.

The audience has nothing for him.

It’s official. DVS Mindz has blown the headliner off the stage.

I submit a rave review, printed in the newspaper two days later under the headline, “U-God Outshined by Topeka Group.” In the piece, I write that the Wu-Tang Clan member was “completely overshadowed by a phenomenal opening act, Topeka’s DVS Mindz, who nearly brought down the house with a charismatic, energetic, and smooth-flowing set.”

My editor at The Mag assigns me to write a feature story about DVS Mindz. I get in touch with Randy, and he sets up a time for me to talk to the band. Our first interview takes place on the afternoon of December 31, 1999, at Randy’s apartment in Topeka. I bring along copies of the U-God review, which instantly endears me to everyone. The interview lasts an hour and a half. I only ask three questions.

Afterward, the band insists that I come out to Stu’s car, where they blast an instrumental and perform “Niggaz (1137),” spitting
furious rhymes into the shoebox-sized Sony cassette recorder that I used to tape our interview.

A couple of weeks later, on January 17, 2000, I am back at Randy’s apartment to take pictures for the band’s The Mag feature. I had assigned the job to one of the newspaper’s photographers, but they canceled at the last minute. Wanting to salvage things, I drove to Topeka with my camcorder, hoping that the newspaper could use video still frames instead of traditional photos.

I had recently begun experimenting with video as a research tool for my master’s thesis project, a study of pawn shops. Just prior to attending my first DVS Mindz concert, I had used student loans to purchase an entry-level camcorder. My intention was to make a documentary film about pawn shops to accompany my written thesis. I spent the fall and winter of 1999 amassing footage of the stores and conducting on-camera interviews with pawnbrokers and clients in Kansas, Missouri, and Illinois.

At Randy’s apartment, I record a few minutes of footage of the guys and their entourage. Barry waxes rhapsodically about the heavyweight bout between Roy Jones Jr. and David Telesco two nights ago. Jones had entered the arena dressed in a tuxedo, with Redman and Method Man alongside him, rapping. “He came out with our boys, Red and Meth, clownin’” Barry says, laughing. “They did ‘Da Rockwilder.’ He went on stage and got his dance on.” Barry demonstrates with a couple of swivel-hipped moves, breaking up the room.

Barry suggests we shoot the photos on the steps of the Kansas State Capitol building. We set out in five cars, a dozen of us in all. We spend twenty minutes walking around the Capitol, combating a brusque January wind, as the band members stop to pose in alleyways and stand on fire escapes.
After the shoot, Daymond invites everyone over to his house, where a massive spread of homemade food is laid out. The entourage is growing now, with wives, girlfriends, cousins, and small children running around. Lenora Douglas, Daymond’s mother and De’Juan’s aunt, serves up generous plates of chicken, macaroni and cheese, green beans, and cornbread and then comes around to dish out seconds. “This is a every-weekend thing,” Daymond tells me, looking around happily.

After gorging ourselves, the band and I go to the backyard, shooting a final round of photos in the “golden hour” light. As I’m getting ready to leave, De’Juan and Barry invite me to the band’s show in Lawrence the following week.

Eight days later, on January 25, 2000, I attend my second DVS Mindz concert, this time bringing my video camera and taping the group’s four-song set. It is an energetic performance, with the audience in a good mood and Barry rolling onto the stage atop a tricked-out lowrider bicycle.

After the concert, the band members, their entourage, and I reconvene in front of the venue, located on downtown Lawrence’s main drag, Massachusetts Street. I hand out a recent edition of The Mag. The cover story is a feature I wrote about Hip Hop Hype, a rap-themed college radio show hosted by a couple of University of Kansas (KU) students. I also have some news about the upcoming DVS Mindz feature in The Mag. “We’re putting you on the cover,” I tell the band. They can’t believe it.

The newspaper was able to use the video still shots we took at the Capitol building and in Daymond’s backyard. My feature on DVS Mindz will run as the cover story of the February 10, 2000, issue of The Mag. High fives and daps go around. “Man, you already part of the fam,” Barry whispers to me warmly, pulling me in close for a one-armed hug.
As we stand there, a twenty-something guy comes out of the venue’s front door and approaches the group. He looks tipsy, swaying woozily from side to side and waving a crumpled dollar bill in his left hand. He asks if anyone has a cigarette to sell.

As Stu reaches into his jacket pocket, the guy claps Barry on the shoulder and mumbles something unintelligible.

Barry draws back and stops. “What did you say?” he asks the man, sharply.

The entire group goes silent.

The drunk guy raises his index finger, about to respond, but before he can get a word out, Barry draws his right fist back and lets loose, punching the man squarely across the jaw with a roundhouse blow. He is knocked back to the sidewalk, out cold. We are standing in front of a crowded nightclub on a busy, well-lit street. There are people everywhere. The band and their entourage instantly set off in all directions. I rush away, too.

I get to my car, unlock the door, and sit down, rattled. I wonder exactly what kind of “fam” I just joined. Thirty minutes earlier, I thought I knew. Now, I have no idea what I am getting myself into. Never could I have imagined that this would be the beginning of a two-decade relationship with DVS Mindz.

DVS MINDZ

This is the story of DVS Mindz, the greatest rap group most people have never heard of. The band formed in Topeka, Kansas, in the early 1990s and developed a reputation for ferocious rhyming and frenetic live performances. Like the best bands, they were greater than the sum of their parts. Each member was distinct and provided an essential ingredient that contributed to
the collective chemistry. The group’s internal volatility often produced greatness but sometimes resulted in catastrophe.

During their heyday in the late 1990s and early 2000s, DVS Mindz released a critically acclaimed CD, was covered by the local music press, was nominated for prestigious awards, and opened for notables that include Run-D.M.C., Redman, De La Soul, Das EFX, and many more. In doing so, DVS Mindz helped pioneer Topeka rap music, a legacy that has been overshadowed by prominent Kansas City (KC) artists, most notably chart-topping superstar Tech N9ne. This book serves as an amendment to the region’s musical history, giving DVS their proper due more than two decades after the fact. But this book is also one that challenges and complicates notions of success.

Our music, movies, TV shows, sports, video games, photos, apps, and social media flood us with an endless stream of success stories, where struggles are overcome, and disappointment begets accomplishment. Even our stories of failure are success stories. “Failing upward” and “failing fast” are status claims in Silicon Valley, where entrepreneurs whose startups flop learn from these setbacks and use those lessons to achieve victory. Failure is glorified as part of a “growth mindset,” and Forbes publishes articles with titles like “Why Failure is Essential to Success.” In academia, Princeton Professor Johannes Haushofer is praised for posting a “CV of Failures” listing declined job applications, paper rejections, and failed submissions for grant funding.

Not everyone who fails, however, goes on to lead another company or profess at Princeton. For many, failure is not a path to career success, wealth, or personal growth. This book is about a band trying to make it in the music industry, an aspiration understood by anyone who has ever had a big dream. It is also about falling short of achieving a big dream and what happens
afterward. Failure to achieve big dreams is a common outcome but a story rarely told.

The members of DVS Mindz were talented, charismatic, and hard-working. They deserved to make it. They didn’t make it because most bands don’t make it. Only three in ten thousand high school athletes go on to play sports professionally—yet rarely do we learn about the other 9,997 players. Their stories are important because they are universal. We all encounter disappointment and find ways to pick ourselves up and continue.

In this book, I focus on the lives and experiences of the band members but offer no theoretical explanations of any kind. I do so deliberately because I believe the life histories of the group members should speak for themselves. The biographies of Jay-Z and Led Zeppelin do not cry out for theoretical analysis, and DVS Mindz’s story does not either. As such, this book can serve as a platform for theoretical inquiry, application, and discussion—or not.

**THE BOOK’S ORGANIZATION**

The book is divided into three parts, spanning about fifty years. Part 1 covers the period from 1970 to 1999. It recounts the early life histories of Stu, Barry, Daymond, and De’Juan. Their Topeka-based families range from middle-class to impoverished, but all of their childhoods are impacted to varying degrees by divorce, absentee fathers, and abandonment. For some, there is considerable domestic violence and substance abuse within the household.

These family dynamics have far-reaching implications for the boys, exacting a toll in their teenage years that includes, to varying degrees, poor educational and occupational outcomes,
involvement in gangs, crime, acts of violence toward others, incarceration, and teenage parenthood. Stu and Barry largely avoid trouble during their adolescence and early twenties, but Daymond and De’Juan have considerable contact with various branches of the criminal justice system.

Part 1 also recounts the formation of DVS Mindz and their early history, when the group members live together in a Topeka house, writing songs and rehearsing around the clock. The band places a premium on hard work and skills, founded on a belief that outworking and outperforming their peers is the ticket to the top. They spend four years grinding relentlessly, securing management, networking around the country, launching their own record label, and opening for some of the biggest names in the music industry. There are setbacks and challenges along the way, but as part 1 concludes, DVS Mindz seems poised for bigger things.

Part 2 covers the period from 2000–2003. At the onset of this era, DVS Mindz is in their artistic prime and at the peak of their popularity. We follow the band backstage, onstage, to recording sessions, and hang out with them at home.

Part 2 is based upon fifty-plus hours of video and audio recordings created from 1999–2003. I recorded much of this material myself, but I was sometimes assisted by my friends Greg Douros, Doug Lerner, Kepler Miner, Eliott Reeder, and Jeff Roos. In March 2000, I directed and edited DVS Mindz’s first music video, “Tired of Talking.” This partnership led to further collaborations, including two more music videos, a short fictional film, and a full-length documentary, \textit{DVStory: The DVS Mindz Documentary}. The latter project entailed interviewing everyone in the band and their manager, Randy, recording fifteen live performances, and following the group as they pursued music stardom. My friends and I videotaped DVS Mindz
performing, writing and recording songs, having group meetings, appearing at radio stations, and hanging out at house parties and barbeques. I conducted short, informal interviews on several occasions not only with the band but also with fans, family, and members of the group’s entourage, all of which were videotaped.

My interest in working with DVS Mindz was not scholarly or journalistic. I simply loved their music, and the group’s musical pursuits paired well with my nascent interest in filmmaking. Through these collaborations, I became close with several members of the band. During this time, it was common for members of DVS to drop by my apartment in Lawrence, often unannounced, usually with several members of their entourage in tow. Similarly, I spent time with them in Topeka, often in a bedroom or basement recording studio. This generally entailed hanging out, but on a few occasions, I brought along a guitar, and we collaborated musically. When the film crew and I accompanied the band to a live performance or recording studio session, we became members of DVS’s entourage.

Every interview quote from part 2 of the book comes exclusively from the 1999–2003 recordings. This enabled me to capture who the group members were at the time and demonstrate how they came to reflect on this era in subsequent decades. During this same period, I worked as a music journalist, including coverage of the regional scene. I interviewed hundreds of local musicians and I draw upon some of those interviews in part 2.

Part 3 takes place from 2004 until 2020. The members of DVS Mindz are now in their forties and early fifties. Some of them are grandfathers. The band has long since broken up, and everyone has gone in different directions. With dreams of musical stardom behind them, how do the four men redefine their lives?
An appendix to the book provides an update on its central characters. It also describes the impact of the events of 2020 and 2021 on the members of DVS Mindz, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 presidential election, and the murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed.

Portions of the book are based on in-person interviews I conducted in 2009, 2014, and 2022 as well as virtual interviews that took place from 2018–2022. In an appendix, I provide more details about my research methods.

This book is not an exposé or an exhaustive historical account of DVS Mindz. Throughout the text, I have changed the names of everyone except for the members of DVS Mindz, their managers, their parents, their current spouses (where applicable), their children, and public figures.

Most of the concerts, music videos, and songs I describe in the book are available to stream online for free and without advertising at https://www.youtube.com/c/DVSMindz1137.

At the end of the book, I have provided a guide to the band’s songs, music videos, and live performances. There is also a discography, a first-ever attempt to catalog the group’s extensive body of band and solo projects. I hope this is the first step toward chronicling the complete musical and cultural contributions of Daymond, Barry, De’Juan, and Stu. May DVS Mindz live on, long after us all.
DVS MINDZ