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BODY:

Every film needs a climax, and Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock, a landmark 1994 HBO documentary about the city's warring street gangs, featured an unforgettable one.

One day, director Marc Levin set out to film his protagonist, a self-appointed gang mediator, on a peacekeeping visit to Little Rock's OGCs, the Original Gangster Crips. Pulaski County Coroner Steve Nawojczyk arrived at a Crip house with buckets of fried chicken under each arm, ready to negotiate a ceasefire between the Crips and their rivals, the Bloods. But before he reached the porch, he was caught in the crossfire of a drive-by shooting, from a car of Bloods, and the answering shots of the Crips. Nawojczyk was filmed anxiously eyeing the action from the ground, like the odd man out in a game of keep-away. The shooting dovetailed neatly with the storyline of Levin's film, which set out to explore the city's skyrocketing homicide rate - specifically its preponderance of black male victims between the ages of 13 and 24. To some, it dovetailed too neatly. The drive-by took place in broad daylight - a brazen move, but also an imminently filmable one, executed under natural light. Levin's detractors, who were legion, felt the incident must have been staged. Either way, it was a sensational image, in every sense of the word.

There is no drive-by shooting, or even its equivalent in

sensationalism, in *Gang War II: Back in the Hood*, a sequel to the original *Bangin'*, that will premiere on HBO at 9 p.m. Thursday. That's not because there is no gun violence to be found in Little Rock's inner city, or because Levin, who returned with his cameras in the summer of 2002, decided after 10 years to put his gloves on. (In fact, a drive-by shooting in territory familiar to Levin injured four young girls Tuesday.) Instead, Levin has focused the new film on the gang-member figures who gained notoriety in the original, mostly former Crip leader Leifel Jackson, and his Blood foil, Marvin Weathersby. The story of the two men, which is still the heart of the story of gangs and the lives they claim, either through murder, incarceration or unshakable social stigma, now follows a flat line of subsistence, rather than jumping with the dodgy spikes of active gang involvement.

"The movie itself is the big scene," said Jackson, commenting on the lack of a dramatic flagpole in *Back in the Hood*. Jackson, the intended victim of the drive-by shooting in *Bangin'*, is followed in the new film through the course of everyday life, which includes a hospital visit to a dying gang shooting victim, his work at a gang intervention program and struggles to gain legitimacy after a lengthy prison sentence served in the intervening years between films.

"There's going to be a big scene no matter what you're looking for."

"There's not the shock value of the first one," agreed Levin. "In a way, I think it's deeper.

"The first one," he added, quoting the reaction of people who have seen the new film, "blew my mind. The second one broke my heart."

Y'ALL CRAZY Marc Levin did not return to Little Rock a conquering hero. Given the reaction to *Bangin'* in Little Rock, which HBO aired under the banner of its investigative series *American Undercover*, Levin would have been as likely to be presented a key to the city as Michael Moore is to get an appointment in the Bush White House.

In 1993, Levin, a filmmaker who had explored prison life through scripted dramas and as a documentarian, attended a national gang summit in Kansas City, where he heard Nawojczyk speak about his

efforts to calm gang warfare in Little Rock. Around the same time, Daphne Pinkerson, Levin's directorial partner, noticed a story in The New York Times that reported the per-capita homicide rate in Little Rock as outranking that of New York and Los Angeles. The filmmakers decided Little Rock was a perfect entry in a series they planned about gangs in the United States: The films would visit East and West Coast iterations of the country's most pervasive gangs, along with stops in rural America. Levin and his camera crew arrived in Little Rock in the summer heat of 1993. The ambience was ideally suited to Levin's needs. The groups he sought to film were often congregating outside. And they were restless.

Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock premiered on HBO Aug. 2, 1994. One solitary hour of television, especially on a paycable channel, is not well-positioned to make a huge cultural impact, but HBO, acting on encouraging ratings and good word-of-mouth, repeated the film frequently - so frequently that in 1996 Gov. Mike Huckabee sent a cease-and-desist plea to the network, requesting that they take the film out of rotation. (By that time, Levin had already sent a cease-and-desist letter of his own, to Little Rock Police who were said to be harassing and expending excessive force on the subjects of the film.) Economic developers claimed Bangin' in Little Rock hampered their efforts to recruit companies to Arkansas. The University of Arkansas at Little Rock said rival schools used the film as a cautionary tale, leaking it to parents of athletes the basketball team hoped to recruit. Meanwhile, the documentary's title, drawing from the common usage "gangbangin'" - itself an umbrella term for the multi-tasking job description of a gang member - took on a different sort of significance in the hip-hop world. Out-Kast referenced the movie in a song.

(HBO documentaries are known for their adoring appropriation of street slang, but not necessarily for their titular restraint: Following the Bangin' sequel, the next America Undercover special scheduled to air goes by the bet-hedging name Atlantic City Hookers: It Ain't EZ Being a Ho.) "East Coast, West Coast, wherever I go, people say, 'Bangin' in Little Rock! Y'all crazy down there!'" said Dameon Thompson, a Little Rock producer whose music HBO licensed for the new film.

Levin said he initially had little interest in revisiting the gang situation in Little Rock, which subsided somewhat after hysteria over the murder rate and its attendant publicity coalesced into increased police presence in gang-saturated neighborhoods, decreased judicial tolerance for drug offenders, and in the cultivation of alert centers and after-school programs. (Another contributing factor in the ceasefire was a grudging but final division of drug sales territory undertaken by Little Rock gangs.) In 1998, the homicide total in Little Rock dipped to 27, but by 2002, due in part to budget cuts that shrunk the police force and closed many alert centers, the rate was once again reaching early-'90s numbers. By fall, around the time of Levin's return, the city had logged 40 murders.

"We've been as busy this week as we ever were during 1993," Mark Malcolm, who succeeded Nawojczyk as Pulaski County Coroner, told the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette that October.

THE LIFE AFTER HBO persisted in seeking a follow-up, so Levin weighed his options. As a journalist rather than a feature filmmaker, he had no need to entreaty the city for help closing streets so he could film, or to work with the state's film commission for tax breaks or help scouting locations. Essentially, the city had nothing to take away, so whether or not Levin would be welcome in Little Rock, nothing about the residual public bitterness over the first film could stop him from coming back.

But he considered the wishes of his subjects, re-approaching them and asking if they'd be interested in him picking up their stories again. In the case of Jackson, it wasn't hard for the filmmaker to re-establish contact. The two became friends after the release of the first film. During a seven-year prison term for drug trafficking, Jackson was profiled by Levin in *Prison Life* magazine, and upon Jackson's release, Levin hired him as a driver and to coordinate interviews for another gang-related documentary he was working on.

But other participants in the earlier film proved harder to find, specifically the members of the mixed-race gang featured in the first half of the original *Bangin'*.

"As much as they lost themselves in that era, they did have, through

family and friends, a lot of options the black kids didn't have," Levin said of his white subjects, who many viewers dismissed as poseurs. "A lot of them had dispersed. None of them were in the same place, while almost all the black kids were still on the 'four' block," he said, referring to a stretch of 14 th Street that served as a nucleus of Little Rock gang life.

Still, he finally caught up with some of the white subjects from *Bangin'*, specifically Trig and Cool-Aid, who at the time were affiliated with Little Rock's sect of the Hoover Folk gang. After the film, Trig enlisted in the military, served in the Middle East, and is now rearing two young, mixed-race daughters from his black girlfriend, who was also depicted in the original film. Cool-Aid, who in *Bangin'* professed a colorblind worldview in a bid for acceptance by harder, black gang leaders, is now in prison, where he has aligned with a white separatist group.

Preparing for the follow-up, Levin filmed familiar characters like Trig and Cool-Aid, as well as Nawojczyk, the hero of the first film, who retired his coroner post and now works for the city of North Little Rock. But in the editing room, he decided to excise all footage that didn't feature his protagonists from the "four" block - namely Jackson, Weathersby, and Weathersby's younger brother "Sonny Boy," now soulful family men struggling to stay straight, and Moran Ellis, still enmeshed in gang activity since his recruitment by Jackson at the age of 9.

"Although there were fascinating stories on all parts, HBO and all of us started to realize, maybe not everyone has seen the original," Levin said. "We can't do a kind of magazine piece: 'Where are these people now?' We wanted to make a movie. And we better make a movie that can stand on its own."

OUR CLUB STAR In the first shot of Leifel Jackson in *Gang War II: Back in the Hood*, he is edging up on a Saturday-night street scene - low, flashy cars on a slow crawl, spilling thumping music and stray limbs. And he is wearing his sunglasses, in the dark.

The shades are an imprimatur of cool - Jackson seems to feed on his faded notoriety as a gangbanger as much as he shuns the particulars

of gangbanging. But they are also a shield against the temptations and the easy, if illegal and trouble-inviting money of the life that has trapped him before, and could ensnare him again.

There's always a chance that by allowing his professional and private life to be filmed, Jackson, who spends his days working at the Sherman Park Our Club in North Little Rock, could be shown in violation of the terms of his parole, which states that he must not associate with felons.

Jackson dismisses this danger with the ease of a frequent interview subject who knows his way around a soundbite. "If I can't make a difference in the community I come from, I don't need to be free anyway," he said recently, in a quiet corner of Our Club.

Initially suspected to be undercover FBI or DEA by the gang members he first approached in 1993, Levin spent weeks with no cameras around to gain the trust of subjects like Jackson. But from his first appearance in the first film, Jackson displays a world-weary facility for presenting the side of himself that most lends itself to the formation of storyline.

But what a storyline: While the original film enhanced the status he and figures like L.A. Moe, one of Little Rock's true original gangsters, enjoyed as a new kind of outlaw folk hero, Jackson's life since has been a downhill slope. He works in North Little Rock, he said, because no one in Little Rock wanted anything to do with him after his incarceration and the notoriety of *Bangin'*. He has no health insurance and hasn't seen a doctor since he left prison several years ago. He was once awarded a "Juvenile Worker for the Year" award, but makes less than \$200 a week as a gang intervention counselor and supports his wife and baby daughter by seeking yard work and other odd jobs.

"A lot of my life, I couldn't read or write, so I was blessed with the voice," Jackson explained. "The camera is not something I'm afraid of. I would always know what Marc was trying to get me to say, so he wouldn't have to ask a lot of questions."

It's tempting to wonder why Jackson would participate in either film,

since both, inevitably, catch him in compromising, possibly incriminating positions. "A lot of people still see me as a drug dealer and a gang member no matter what I do," said Jackson. The new film "may settle something in some of the folks' hearts who can't forgive, that people can change," he said. "The first one was to spread a message, too. A lot of people were feeling bad. They couldn't get no help. A lot of people were getting killed."

Back in the Hood depicts Jackson hosting Weathersby, his former rival, for a talk at Our Club, which attempts to reach children with anti-gang messages at the age at which most new members are recruited - the age at which Jackson once recruited Ellis.

Both on film and in person, the children in Jackson's charge respond eagerly and warmly to his message, and he said he has no trouble these days finding new, young recruits - for Our Club.

"They come through word of mouth," he said. "And, I'm on TV a lot."

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