
Preface

This is folklore. DJ Screw is a Texas legend. He is bona fide hip-hop royalty and a pioneer of his discipline who left us with a rich archive of music that both documented and shaped a culture, remaking the fabric of Houston itself in the process. Robert Earl Davis Jr. has been gone for two decades now, but the sound of his chopped and screwed mixing technique has left an indelible mark on contemporary music. His Screw tapes continue to sell and get sampled by other artists, and unearthed volumes of his recordings still materialize each year, adding to the mystique of the underground cassettes that have sold into the millions all over the world.

When I moved to Houston in 1992, Geto Boys were local heroes, breaking nationally the summer before. Shortly thereafter, it was DJ Screw who would emerge to define the sound of the city. You heard it first in the streets, and it was heavy. It was enchanting. It was mystical. It made Houston feel different from anywhere else on the planet. By the mid-1990s, you couldn't open a window in the big, hot city without hearing a car drive by playing slowed down hip-hop. You still can't.

A decade later, I was years into working on a book chronicling Houston rap music with photographer Peter Beste, and DJ Screw's name was omnipresent in nearly every interview I conducted. The stories people told about him were larger than life, more than just posthumous remembrances. He was the lifeblood of a huge swath of the city, and it was clear

that his innovation, wisdom, and love for the people of Houston and Smithville forged a legacy deserving of its own book.

This is part of a greater library, an expanding fount of knowledge about an independent artist who came from nothing and dreamed up something bigger than his city. To tell the story of DJ Screw is to illuminate the history of Houston, a place that still reverberates with his vibe a full generation after his time. The artists who collaborated with him on that huge catalog are still at work—the same voices who crafted timeless stories from rounds of the ranking game *The Dozens*, from freestyles recounting their lives, or from the magic they created in the room with those turntables spinning—their testimony filling in the puzzle that is the life of Robert Earl Davis Jr.

No matter how many interviews I do with the people who knew him, I'll still be an outsider in DJ Screw's life. I didn't know him personally; I'm a white punk rocker from Galveston Island. This hybrid oral history format is intended to open the aperture past my own eyes, ears, and experience, centering on the recollections of those who knew him, loved him, and drew inspiration from his work. Beyond my own research, I called on the reporting and scholarship of the authors and journalists who preceded me, so that DJ Screw and those who lived alongside him are the ones retelling this epic story.

I am eternally grateful to Screw's family and friends for blessing this project and for their commitment, cooperation, and help throughout, and to the 153 people who have given their time and attention through multiple interviews since 2005. Recollections open old wounds; the candor and confidences of our conversations over the years have been invaluable in gathering material for this project. For all of you, on and off the record, I hope you are reminded of Screw in these pages. This is your book.

A traditional biography this is not, but none of us live traditional biographies anymore. The future is behind us before we can ever live it. No one can keep up. But DJ Screw *slowed down the world*, and over the years his music has continued to grow and prove more relevant and influential across generations. Screw set off a wave. May that wave circle the world forever.

Lance Scott Walker

NEW YORK

DJ Screw



Robert Earl Davis Jr. (DJ Screw) outside of his grandmother Jessie's house in Smithville. Courtesy of Michelle Wheeler.



Robert Earl (DJ Screw), Ida Mae Deary Davis, and Michelle "Red" Wheeler. Courtesy of Michelle Wheeler.



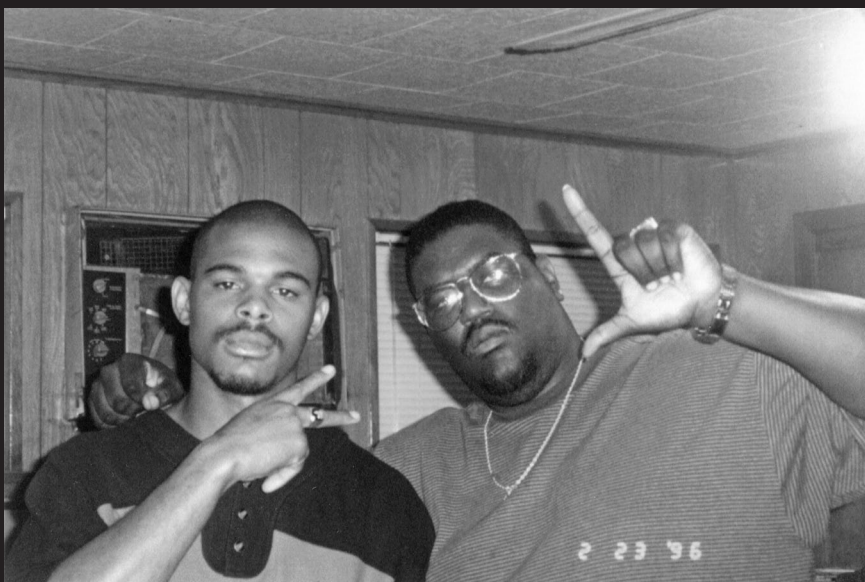
Michelle “Red” Wheeler and Robert Earl (DJ Screw). Courtesy of Michelle Wheeler.



Michelle Wheeler holding her daughter Shimeka, Ida Mae Deary Davis, DJ Screw, and Jessie Deary, right before Screw left Smithville for Houston, 1986. Photo: Uncle Buddy Boy. Courtesy of University of Houston Libraries Special Collections, collection of Nikki Williams.



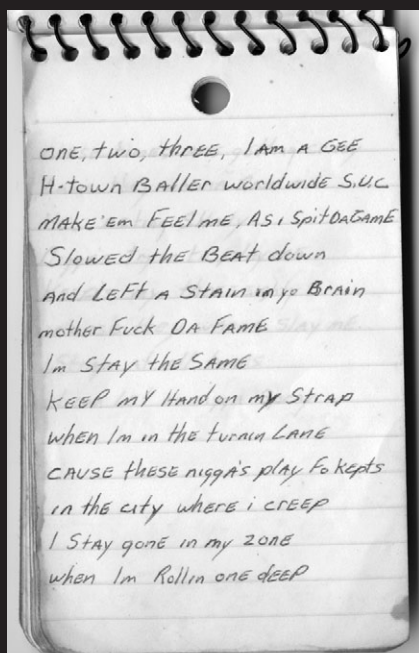
IMG/Nation: Trouble House, DJ Screw, and Great Black Shark. Charles Washington got Screw working as a DJ with two of his former classmates at Sterling High School, in the group originally called Legion of Doom, 1990–1991. Courtesy of University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.



Al-D and Big DeMo in the wood room, months before the recording of Screw's most infamous tape, *June 27th*. Photo: DJ Screw. Courtesy of DeMo Sherman and University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.



DJ Screw at Maestro's studio in southwest Houston during the recording of his album *3 'N the Mornin'*, 1996. Photo: DeMo Sherman. Courtesy of DeMo Sherman and University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.



Screw's notebook and a Screw tape from 1999. Courtesy of University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.



Nikki, Poppy (in back), DJ Screw, Stick 1, and Mrs. Chatham at Stick's wedding, 1999. Photo courtesy of Stick 1.



Bamino outside of his shop in South Park, a Houston cultural landmark where DJ Screw went to get his car washed and where everybody still goes to this day, especially for the air freshener, 2014. Bam is the older brother of Mike-D (Southside Playaz). Photo: Lance Scott Walker.



Kay-K, Big Hawk, Fat Pat, and DJ Screw for Dead End Alliance album shoot, 1997.
Photo: Deron Neblett.



Front row: E.S.G., Derrick "D-Reck" Dixon, Mr. 3-2, DJ Screw, Noke D, B Hawk, and Darin, by Dallas photographer James Bland for Daika Bray's article in XXL, 1999.
Photo: jamesblandphotography.com.



Pamela Davis (niece), DJ Screw, PawPaw Jack (Ida Mae's boyfriend), and Poppa Davis (nephew) in Smithville, late 1990s. Courtesy of Michelle Wheeler.



Robert Earl Davis Sr. (Poppa Screw) at home in Southside Houston, 2008.
Photo: Peter Beste.



Meshah Hawkins, Lil' Keke, Lance Scott Walker, Shorty Mac, and E.S.G. at University of Houston, 2012. Big Pokey was there later. Photos behind them: DJ Screw, Fat Pat, Big Hawk, Big Moe, and Pimp C. Photo: Julie Grob.



Screw's family at his grave site on what would have been his forty-seventh birthday, 2018. Back row, left to right: Susan Davis, Poppa Davis, Michelle Wheeler with DaMari, Pamela Davis, and Shimeka Johnson. On the slab, left to right: Kianna, DeMario, Joshua, Jaylon, and Charles Jr. Photo: Lance Scott Walker.