

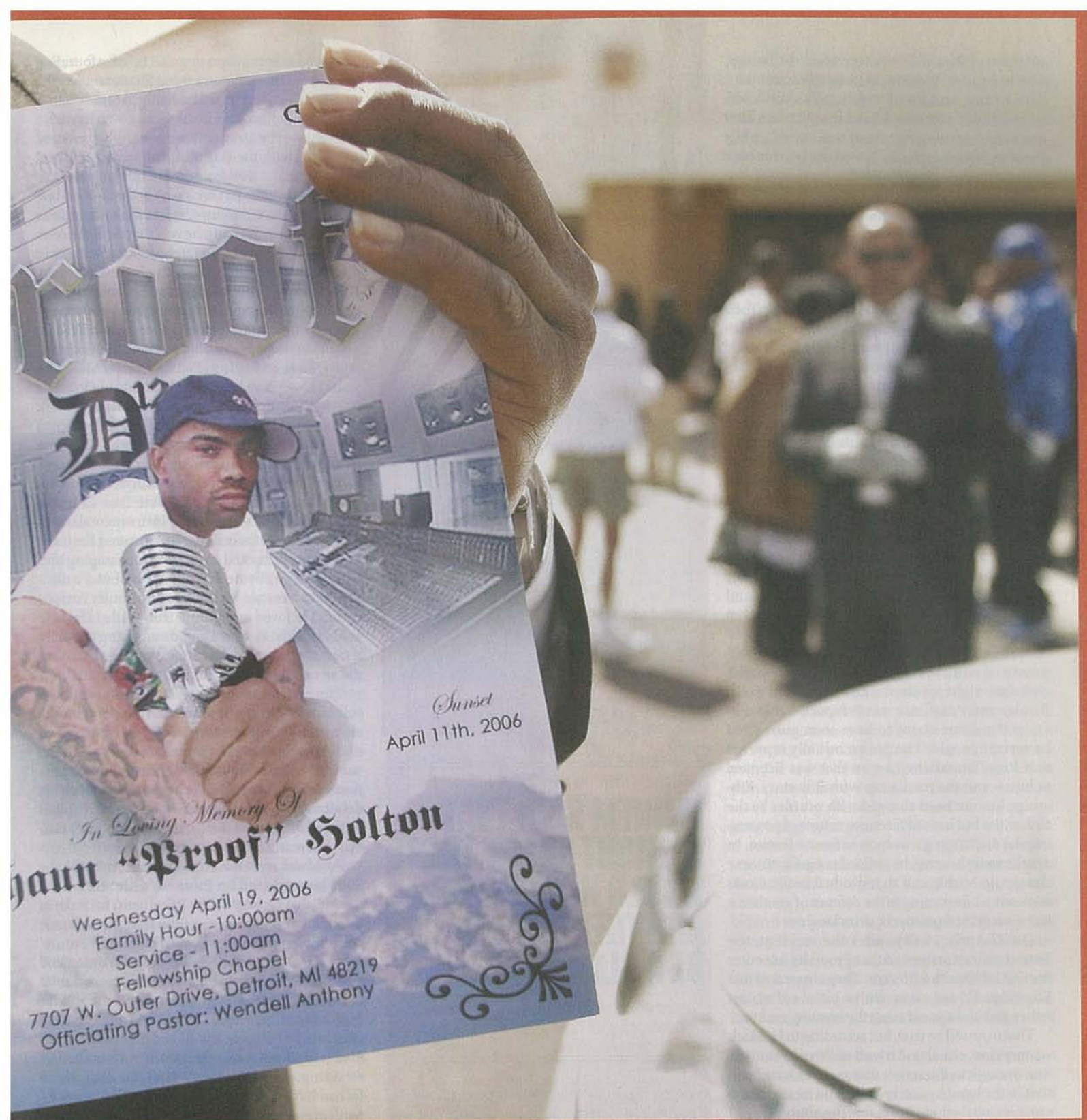
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*Miranda Sawyer meets  
girl about town Lily Allen,  
a perfect modern pop star  
in the making*

# LILY THE KID

PORTRAIT  
CLAUDIA JANKE







# PROOF POSITIVE

*The murder last month of Eminem's closest friend, the rapper Proof, has been dismissed as just another hip-hop slaying by the Detroit press. In a special investigation, **Anthony Bozza**, the only journalist with access to the artist's inner circle, reveals the truth about his life and revisits the events of that fateful night*

**F**our thousand fans passed through the Fellowship Chapel on West Outer Drive, Detroit, Michigan, to pay their last respects to Proof on 18 April. Queuing by 8.30am, they were sent home over 12 hours later; throughout the day, the stream of human traffic never stopped. The rapper was laid out in a 24-carat gold-plated casket and had been dressed in a beige suit, his trademark Kangol cap and a pair of brown Seamless Edition Air Force 1 trainers; a Detroit Pistons jersey signed by his fans and friends on the basketball team was also draped over his dead body. Floral tributes were gathered around: one arrangement spelled out the word 'Daddy' while another was fashioned into an orange P; another read '8 Mile' in red roses, and another was in the shape of a white heart with a gold ribbon that read 'Spice of Life'.

The next day, the 2,000-capacity chapel was packed, with its car park holding the overflow, the crowd listening to the four-hour service via loudspeaker. Proof's family – blood and musical – filled the front rows of the chapel. Dr. Dre, Xzibit, Lloyd Banks and Young Buck of G-Unit, and Treach and Vinnie of Naughty by Nature were there, as well as the remaining members of Proof's group D12 and a host of other local luminaries: members of Slum Village, of 5 Ela, Goon Squad, Promatic and more.

Eminem sat between his manager, Paul Rosenberg, and 50 Cent in the second row, just behind Proof's mother, wife, aunts, children and cousins.

The loss visibly weighed on the hip-hop superstar. Wearing a black suit and a black T-shirt emblazoned with Proof's likeness, he moved slowly, hunched over, a shadow of his usual self. He repeatedly embraced members of Proof's family – his wife Sharonda, mother Sherallene and grandmother Myra – crying with them, hugging them, and rocking back and forth. Eminem had lost the best friend he had ever known, the only person who had stood by him since his teens, his right-hand man both on and off-stage.

DeShaun Dupree Holton, aka P, Big Proof, Proof or Derty Harry [sic], died at 4.30am on 11 April at the age of 32. That night, he had been at the CCC club, an after-hours establishment on a sketchy stretch of East 8 Mile road in Detroit, where he and a few friends were playing pool after a night of party-hopping. He found himself in an argument with Keith Bender Jr, a 35-year-old Desert Storm veteran, allegedly during a game of pool. An altercation ensued, attracting the

**Clockwise from top: a funeral-home worker holds a programme for Proof's funeral service; mourners outside the Fellowship Chapel; with Eminem; the CCC nightclub on East 8 Mile.**  
Getty; AP; Karin Catt/Idols; Zuma





attention of the club's bouncer, Mario Etheridge, who is Bender's cousin. Within a few minutes, both Bender and Proof were fatally shot: a bullet to Bender's face took his life eight days later (the same morning that Proof was buried), while Proof was killed instantly by two shots to his back and one to the back of his head.

These are the facts, but the events that led to the twin shootings are not nearly as clear-cut as the Detroit police and press have suggested. From the start, *the Detroit Free Press* and other local news agencies took initial witness accounts at face value, and portrayed the incident as a thug rapper slaying a war veteran in cold blood. According to their accounts, Proof pistol-whipped Bender, then shot him in the face, at which point, while Proof stood over Bender threatening to shoot him again, Etheridge shot Proof three times.

Etheridge drove Bender to the hospital that night and without revealing his identity, phoned the police en route to report a shooting at the club, but he avoided detectives for several days thereafter. As their investigation slowly drew closer to him, Etheridge opted to turn himself in with his lawyer present, and gave testimony identical to the version of events that had been reported in the local papers. By the time he did, well before any substantive ballistics tests were concluded (as we go to press, they are still being processed), the media, had tried and convicted DeShaun Holton as the man who shot first and received his just deserts.

Nowhere was it reported that, a some witnesses claim, the fight that ensued in the club that night involved more men than Keith Bender and Proof, nor was it reported that others at the scene claim to have seen guns fired by several people. The police initially reported that Proof brandished a gun that was licensed to him – and the media ran with this story. Etheridge has not been charged with murder by the authorities but instead faces two counts of possessing and discharging a weapon without a license. In a preliminary hearing, he pleaded not guilty to these charges. In Michigan if an individual fatally shoots someone while coming to the defence of another, it is not considered murder or manslaughter.

On 27 April, 16 days after the incident, the Detroit police announced that Proof did not enter the CCC club with a firearm. They also stated that Etheridge did not arrive with a pistol either, but rather grabbed a gun during the ensuing ruckus.

That may well be true, but according to H. Mack – a very close childhood friend of Proof's who was near enough to the action that night to have been shot in the hand by a stray bullet and treated at the same hospital where Proof was pronounced dead – even the revamped police version of events isn't quite right. 'It was fucked up,' he says. 'The fight wasn't just the two of them, everyone in the club was involved. Guns started goin' off. P hit the guy, and then his cousin Etheridge fired shots into the ceiling. I do not believe P shot the man – he'd never shoot nobody unless they fired first. That's who he was. Yeah, they were fighting over some bullshit but he would never, ever shoot someone over some bullshit. It was all just fucked up.' The CCC club is a stout red building with a grey roof, a thick grey steel door and no windows. It is on a barren corner of 8 Mile across from a giant yellow Mega Pawn store. 8 Mile marks the border between the city and its suburbs, between the haves and have-nots, between black and white. The CCC



Victim Keith Bender (top) and his cousin, club bouncer Mario Etheridge.

## EMINEM SAID THAT WITHOUT PROOF THERE WOULD NOT BE A D12 AND THERE WOULD NOT BE A SLIM SHADY

is on the black city side, and has been a hotbed of illegality and violence since 1996. 'Since that year, there have been 18 incidents at the club that have resulted in police reports,' says deputy chief James Tate, spokesman for the Detroit Police Department. 'These incidents range from a fight to a stolen vehicle, and one raid.' In 2005 alone, a total of 337 violations were issued at the club, resulting in 12 felony arrests, 68 towed vehicles and 24 confiscated firearms. In February of this year, a bouncer at the club was shot twice in the torso. 'We've been trying to get the place shut down as of late,' Tate says. 'All we can do is issue tickets. The courts decide the rest. When you have a location that is a magnet for trouble, we do what we can to see the situation resolved. When you have owners operating illegally, they're setting the tone for whatever occurs from that point on.'

It might seem surprising that Proof, a founding member of the million-earning Shady family – the music collective that, second only to Motown, has put Detroit music on the map – was even in such a club. Buoyed by Eminem's success, he had enjoyed huge hits with the D12 albums *Devil's Night* and last year's *D12 World*, a number one in both Britain and America. But he wasn't at the CCC to bolster his street credibility – he was there because as countless friends testify, he was Detroit to the core.

Proof was a man who rarely slept: he was either at clubs, in the studio or napping between the two. Long after he didn't need to care for others, he did, helping, guiding and influencing everyone around him and apprenticing local rappers: *Hand 2 Hand: Official Mixtape Instruction Manual*, the first mixtape release on his Iron Fist label, stars MCs who would never have been heard outside of Detroit if it weren't for Proof. He also used his fame to work for local musicians' benefits, encouraging them to join the Musicians Union, which provides them with healthcare and pensions.

He did not brag about these efforts, nor boast of his guidance of Eminem and Obie Trice's careers. Proof was key in selecting the instrumental tracks that best suited their skills, and inspired Eminem at all times of day and night by text messaging him couplets and rhymed phrases. Proof was a nimble, witty freestyle MC, with a ferociously curious mind. He loved everything from Miles Davis to Jimi Hendrix. He was a gifted and giving anomaly, a rapper who cared for art over materialism, but did all he could to bring wealth to others.

The easiest way to understand Proof is to ask this simple question: what other rapper with the rhyme skills and smarts to pen chart hits, and on the heels of multi-platinum success and the worldwide attention brought through his association with Eminem, would choose to release as his debut solo album an introspective record inspired by the philosophy of the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia – last year's *Searching for Jerry Garcia*?

Proof was represented in two ways in *8 Mile*, the 2002 biopic based on Eminem's life. He played the MC that causes 'Rabbit' (Eminem) to choke in the first battle-rap scene of the film. But his true spirit inspired the dreadlocked character 'Future' (played by Mekhi Phifer), the MC who organized and refereed the rap battles. He encourages Rabbit to find his voice as a rapper, just as Proof did for Marshall Mathers. Swift of D12 said it best shortly after hearing that his friend had died, when gathered with Proof's closest friends – a hundred or so strong – at St. Andrew's Hall, the club where he had hosted so many rap battles. 'That nigga P,' Swift announced to everyone, 'he came out of hip hop's pussy.'

DeShaun Holton's father was once involved in the music industry and produced records by acts including Tower of Power. In an interview, however, Proof once referred to his father as a 'crackhead' and it has been alleged that his mother was also involved in drugs. He attended Gesu private school in his youth before enrolling at Osborn High on Detroit's east side. He formed his first rap group, the 5 Ela, with his friends Thyme and Mudd, then the influential Goon Squad, which featured Stylz, Trick Trick and DJ OC. He truly left his mark, however, at designer Maurice Malone's Hip Hop Shop, where he MC'd freestyle sessions on Saturday afternoons. Local and national ▶



talent, from the Notorious BIG to Redman and Method Man passed through the shop, eager to battle with Detroit's finest.

Proof was the consummate diplomat, charming everyone. He was also the only kid in the neighbourhood to see the potential in a smart-ass white boy named Marshall Mathers. Proof taught Mathers how to hone his wit, and sneaked him into the Osborn High cafeteria to battle rap at lunch hour.

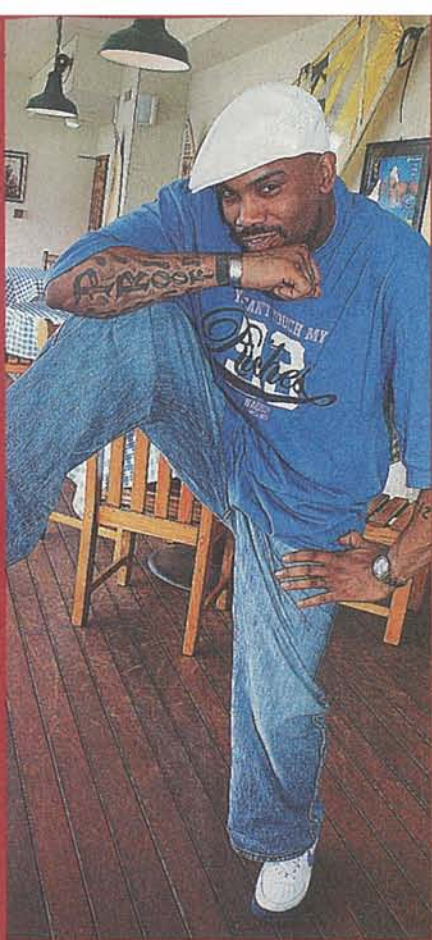
As Mudd of 5 Ela recalled warmly, Proof was always a loyal friend. 'He was my big brother, he taught me how to rap, how to talk to the ladies, he taught me to kick game,' he said. 'This is who he was: when my first child was about to be born, I was telling him one day how worried I was about providing for my family. The very next day, without a word, he dropped off a huge bag full of all his family's old baby clothes.'

As Eminem declared at Proof's funeral, 'Without Proof, there would be a Marshall Mathers, but there would not be an Eminem, there would not be a D12 and there would not be a Slim Shady.' He made it clear that Proof looked out for Marshall when no one else did. 'This is the man I knew,' Eminem said. 'He came to me one day when I was living in my house on the east side and threw a pair of shoes at me and said, "Put 'em on." I said, "Why?" He said, "Put 'em on your feet." I said "Why?" 'Because I'm tired of you wearing those same dirty-ass shoes.'

It is an understatement to say that Eminem was hit hard by the loss – it was the latest in a string of hardships that has befallen him. Following a six-week spell in rehab for addiction to the sleeping pill Ambien, in the first five months of 2006 he has re-married his ex-wife Kim and then divorced her for a second time after only 82 days together, while his mother's health has also drastically degenerated. Before Proof's killing, Eminem's friend Obie Trice also came close to death; on New Year's Eve, the Shady Records artist most-likely-to-break-out-big-this-year, was shot in the head, while driving himself and his girlfriend home from a party. Trice steered his car safely off the highway, let his girlfriend take the wheel and two days later was found doing push-ups in his hospital room.

**At Proof's funeral, Trice echoed a theme that ran throughout the proceedings – that violence in Detroit, and every black community in America is needlessly ending lives.** 'I want to talk to the black men in here,' he said, choking back tears. 'We been comin' up in this struggle and we killin' each other. Yeah, I know – you 'hood, you gangsta. We all from the 'hood. Detroit is the 'hood. We are killin' each other, dawg, and it's about nothin'. We are leaving our kids, our mamas, our grandmamas over nothin'.'

Proof's casket was led by a white horse-drawn carriage to Woodlawn Cemetery, a two-hour trip that tied up traffic across town. His final resting place is beautiful – more a park than a collection of gravestones, complete with lush, manicured foliage, a pond, ducks and geese. The coffin was opened for his nearest and dearest to see him once more. They kissed his cheek or forehead and said their last goodbyes, as a flock of white doves was released in his honour. Afterwards, they gathered at the Good Life Lounge, to do what more than a few felt would be his wish for them that day – to have a party. A huge D-town soul-food spread was laid out: barbeque, mashed potatoes, greens,



21 March 2006: Proof's last photo shoot.

## A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

When KRS-One penned 'Stop The Violence' in response to the 1987 shooting of his partner Scott La Rock he ushered in what, in retrospect, looks like hip hop's age of chivalry, with gunplay largely confined to the records rappers made. A decade later Black Star re-worked the song as 'Definition', with the chorus 'one, two, three, it's kinda dangerous to be an MC', in response to the murders of Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur. What should have been an epitaph for an era now looks like prophecy, with names like Big L, Soulja Slim and Run DMC's producer Jam Master Jay among the fallen.

Some label owners (Death Row's Suge Knight the most notorious) have been forced to deny murdering their own artists, while some stars are becoming victims of their own entourage: Lil' Kim was jailed for perjury last year after claiming her 'magic sunglasses' prevented her seeing her friends exchange shots with a rival rap crew outside New York radio station Hot 97. The days when KRS could claim 'real bad boys move in silence' seem like a quaint relic of a bygone time. Steve Yates

mac and cheese, biscuits. Old school hip hop was in the house, everything from Eric B and Rakim to NWA boomed from the system. The occasion was grim, but Proof's legacy prevailed – he had brought everyone together once more, and the lust for living that informed his life was tangible. As the night wore on and the dance floor filled, songs like D12's 'Purple Pills' (later re-titled 'Purple Hills') and Proof's solo work inspired hoots, hollers, and the joyous spraying of beer.

'He gave me my name,' Obie Trice said of his

friend and mentor. 'When I met him at the Hip Hop Shop, my name was Obie 1. Proof was about to introduce me and he looked at me for a while and said, "What's your name? Your real name, no gimmicks." He introduced me as Obie Trice. He gave me my name. He did all that shit, man. He was the pioneer of Detroit hip-hop music.'

Mike D, manager of St. Andrew's Hall, knew Proof for years and saw money and fame have little effect on him. He recalled the night not long ago when Proof drove up to the club in a new BMW 750 – a gift from Eminem. 'It was not the kind of car he'd roll in,' Mike says. 'I was like, "Nice car." He threw me the keys and said, "Take it for a ride. You know I don't care about material shit." He didn't – he'd drive anything.' Proof cared far more for people – by the end of an average night, going from place to place, he'd accumulate a posse of 20 or more, hosting a roving party rooted by his magnetic spirit. 'I've never met anyone like him,' Mike D says. 'He'd be at our club nearly every night that he went out. He didn't care what kind of band was on, he just wanted to see the music. He used to take my entire staff at St. Andrew's out to breakfast when he'd be there at closing time. I'm talking 30, 50 people – all of the employees, the DJs, everyone.'

Over the course of the night of the wake, within many circles of conversation, talk inevitably turned to the circumstances of Proof's death. Those who knew Proof were quick to point out how he rolled: he liked to drink and when necessary, had no problem throwing a punch. But he was no gun-toting killer. Proof's police record best tells the tale: it reveals several tickets for public drunkenness and disorderly conduct, including an incident in which he swung at a police officer. None of his run-ins with the law involved weapons. Proof was a man with many sides – warm and charming, mischievous and sly, sometimes a brawler, but never a gang-banging braggart.

A close friend who was at the CCC but asked to remain anonymous has his own version of what went down that night. 'Once Etheridge started shooting in the air, we all got down on the floor behind the pool table,' he alleges. 'We were just trying to get out of there, but Proof and Bender started fighting again.' According to this witness, the club was cleared while Proof's lifeless body lay on the floor. A few minutes later, he was deposited outside the club's back door, his jewellery and money gone.

There is much that is left unanswered about the circumstances surrounding Proof's death. This incident is a senseless tragedy that should inspire change, not blame. In the end, ballistic science will reveal whether the bullet that killed Keith Bender was shot from the same gun that killed DeShaun Holton. If that is the case, perhaps the city of Detroit and the rest of America will search beyond the knee-jerk headlines that portrayed Proof as the gun-slinging thug who killed the war hero. If the initial reports are true, perhaps, in time, how he died will not obscure how he lived. When the dust settles, Proof should be seen truthfully, as the authentic voice of Detroit that he was: complex, angry, sarcastic, earnest, loyal, and proud of his roots. He should be remembered as the artist that he was – a man consumed with supporting the place that weaned him; a man, who was, ultimately, consumed by the very same. **OMM**