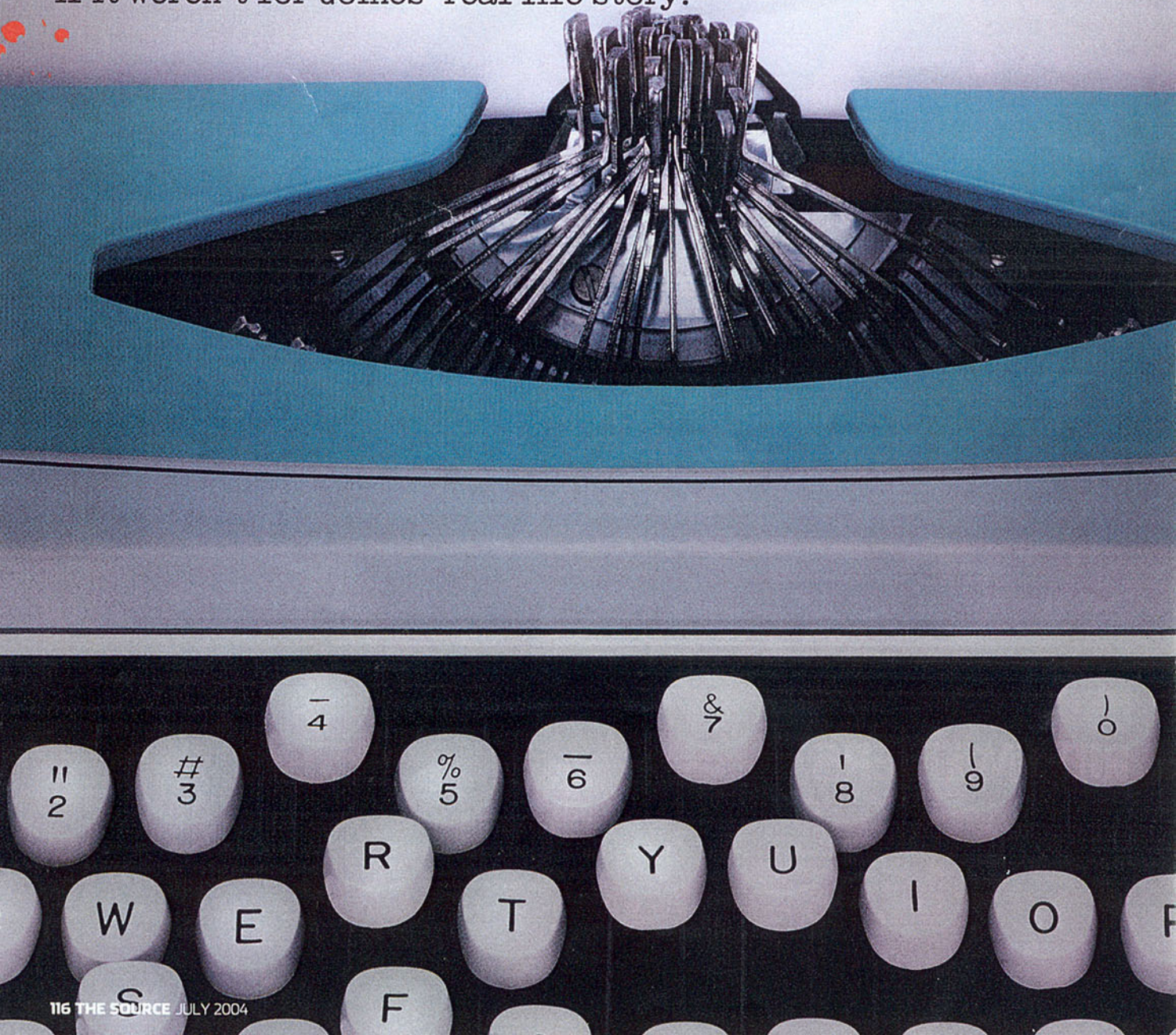


IT WAS WRITTEN

Words by Jerry L. Barrow

Donald Goines is celebrated for the ~~visual~~ graphic realism in his striking ~~books~~ novels. But that fiction, recently presented on the big screen with DMX's *Never Die Alone*, wouldn't ~~exist~~ exist if it weren't for Goines' real life story.



AT 16 HE LIED HIS WAY INTO THE U.S. AIR FORCE. By 19 he was a heroine-addicted pimp on the streets of Detroit. He was serving time at 25 for attempted robbery, and learned how to bootleg liquor behind bars.

This isn't the life of a supervillain from one of Donald Goines' celebrated novels, such as *Daddy Cool* or *Crime Partners*. This was the life he lived. The life he chose. The life he sold in the pages of some of the most uncompromising and compelling depictions of the Black experience in America.

For years, Hip-Hop artists have drawn inspiration from Donald Goines' grisly and detailed descriptions of criminal life. Like many Hip-Hop songs, he opened the door to a world that many readers didn't even know existed. Now with his books becoming movies (DMX recently starred in *Never Die Alone* and has bought the rights to *Daddy Cool*) and a feature biopic in the works (*Donnie's Story*), new generations are beginning to discover this mysterious urban griot.

UNLIKE MANY OF THE CHARACTERS IN HIS BOOKS, Goines was not born in the streets. His grandparents migrated from Mississippi to escape the Ku Klux Klan only to encounter the bitter racism up north in Detroit. His father, Joseph Goines Jr., survived the Great Depression of the '20s by operating his own dry-cleaning plant, a profitable business he hoped to pass on to his son. But the allure of breaking the law was something young Donald could not ignore.

Despite his private-school education and solid home life, Goines took to the Detroit streets. The flashy pimps and hustlers intrigued him with their power and clout. With a slim physique and light skin that led to the hurtful nicknames "yellow dog" and "albino," Goines sought respect learning street hustles, such as three-card molly, and stole clothes and food to sell on the black market. Donald's father saw his son slipping away and tried to keep him off the street by setting up a room complete with a record player and pool table above his cleaning plant. But the 13-year-old earned cool points with his friends by turning it into a rumpus room where they could smoke weed, shoot dice and kick game to pretty girls.

Yet one person who wasn't impressed with his game was Donald's mother. After constant pleading from his mother to go straight, Donald decided that he wanted to leave home. But he didn't want to fully immerse himself in life on the street, so he secured a fake I.D. and joined the Air Force. Before long he was sent out to Japan to fight in the Korean War. On the other side of the world, Goines would encounter the fight of his life, but not on the battlefield.

"With his new-found friends in the Air Force, Donald Goines found the advent of opium a delightful and pleasant diversion," Eddie Stone writes in his Goines biography *Donald Writes No More*. "And then came cocaine, easy enough to score."

Goines returned to Detroit in 1955 and the heroin he was able to get

so easily in Korea became a \$100-a-day habit (the equivalent to roughly \$686 today). Desperate, Goines talked his way into the pimp game. He started with several women, and by 1957, at the age of 21, he had 10 women working for him. But after stepping on the toes of a local hitman-turned-pimp, Goines received a warning in the form of a castrated cat hanging from his living room ceiling. Fearing for his family, he packed up his belongings and left Detroit.

DONALD HEADED SOUTH HOPING TO APPLY HIS HUSTLES, but the climate of the Civil Rights struggle was not conducive to his ways. He returned to the Motor City after a year. Donald again supported his drug habit through a mix of gambling and pimping, but he was just getting by. Eventually, he attempted to rob a local numbers house but was foiled by a rusty safe and was arrested. In March 1961, he was sentenced to a federal-prison term of two to 20 years.

This was the first of his many stints in prison. Donald was locked up for all kinds of crimes and misdemeanors, from larceny to bootlegging. In between prison stays he met his wife Shirley, who encouraged him to write after reading some Westerns he'd written while behind bars. In 1969, while he was serving, an inmate introduced Goines to the work of Robert Beck (aka Iceberg Slim). Soon thereafter, Goines composed his first novel, *Whoreson*.

He would go on to put his life story between the pages of his 15 books, and became famous for it. But his addiction still ruled his life. In a vicious cycle—he would shoot, write, get paid, and shoot some more—he made enough to support Shirley and their daughters, Camille and Donna, but everything else went up his arm.

Goines never beat his addiction, and his life ended like one of his novels: No glory for the hustler, no clean getaway. On Oct. 21, 1974, Shirley answered a knock at the door and two armed White men barged into their apartment. Her husband was at the typewriter when five shots pierced his

skull and killed him. The gunmen then turned to the kitchen and murdered Shirley as their daughters watched in terror. The case has never been solved.

Donna, now 32, doesn't remember much from that day, but remembers her father's contributions as a writer. There are no streets or parks in Detroit named after Donald Goines, but with MCs name-dropping him and movies like *Never Die Alone* being made, she feels he is being properly memorialized. When asked if he she thinks her father should have gone into the dry cleaning business he was to inherit instead of getting into life on the streets, she answers, "He'd probably still be alive, but wouldn't nobody know about him," she says. "He probably wouldn't have been a writer. Sometimes a tragedy can make something great."

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