

The Rise and Fall of Death Row Records

BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

On August 7, 2001, Marion "Suge" Knight, the 350-pound boss of Death Row records, was released from prison after serving five years on charges stemming from an 1992 assault. About the time Knight regained his freedom, a new documentary film, *Welcome to Death Row*, about the rise and fall of his company was making the rounds looking for a distributor to show it in theaters.

Five months later, *Welcome to Death Row* still hasn't had much of a public airing and the dozen or so artists who spoke on camera are feeling intimidated. Some have received death threats. Others fear for their careers.

The story told by *Welcome to Death Row* is a cautionary tale about the grimy realities of the entertainment industry, one that has made billions exploiting the talents of songwriters and musicians. It's a story of mercenary lawyers, drug gangs, and unrelenting harassment by police and the FBI. In the end, although the label generated more than \$400 million in sales, its top star was dead, its business manager was in jail and all the money was gone, most of it filched by white businessmen.

Compton didn't give birth to rap, but the music that came off the streets of Los Angeles in the late 1980s took the genre to a new level, artistically and politically. The leading forces of this new militant sound included rappers Eazy E, Ice Cube, MC Ren and Dr. Dre. The polyrhythmic beats and explicit lyrics, about drugs, sex, the violence of the streets and police brutality, were way beyond what any radio stations were willing to put on the air. But it didn't matter. The records sold hundreds of thousands of copies anyway and drew the squawks of such sentinels of public morality as Tipper Gore, William Bennett and Joe Lieberman.

The records sold and made millions for the record labels but that didn't mean the artists got paid. It's one of the oldest stories in music: labels ripping off writ-

ers and performers. A small group of rappers from Compton, led by Dr. Dre and his partner DOC, wanted to break out of this cycle of exploitation, form their own label and keep control over their songs and masters.

Dre sought out Dick Griffey, a black LA businessman and owner of SOLAR records, which had recorded numerous local R&B groups. Griffey offered Dre and his fellow artists, including Snoop Doggy Dog, office space and a studio in Hollywood. "The major labels will never understand street music", Griffey says. "But rap proved to be our CNN, our 60 Minutes, our Dateline."

Now Suge Knight enters the fray. Knight met Dr. Dre while he was working as a bodyguard for Bobby Brown. Knight was a college graduate, also smart, imposing and had done the near impossible: extracted royalty money owed to black rappers from record labels and white artists (notably Vanilla Ice, who claimed that Knight had threatened to toss him off a hotel balcony unless he paid his client points on a record). Knight became part of Dre's team and helped to found Death Row Records, handling the fledgling label's business end.

Dre and his cohorts immediately went to work in Griffey's studio creating what would become one of the most important albums of the 90s, *The Chronic*. But while they had their own label, they didn't have much money or a way to distribute their records. That's when two other key players arrive on the scene: Michael Harris and David Kenner. In the 1980s, Harris, also known as Harry-O, was one of LA's biggest cocaine dealers. But he'd also dabbled in legitimate businesses. He'd been one of the first blacks to produce a Broadway show, *Chocolate*, starring Denzel Washington. But Harry-O had fallen on hard times. He'd been busted on conspiracy to commit murder, also on drug trafficking charges and was serving a long prison sentence.

Harry-O's attorney was David

Kenner, a former prosecutor with a taste for the Hollywood scene. Harry-O said to Kenner, who was working to get him out of jail on probation, that he was interested in investing some money in an entertainment venture. He told Kenner that he had heard about Death Row records and asked him to contact Suge Knight. According to Harris, Kenner brought Knight to meet him in prison where they cut a deal. Harris would invest \$1.5 million in Death Row for a 50 percent stake in the company. Kenner would become the lawyer for Death Row and its parent company, Godfather Entertainment.

The infusion of cash from Harris made Death Row a player. They decided to have a kick-off party for the label at Chasen's, a famous Old Hollywood restaurant. The invitations, which went out to some of the top executives in the music world, were printed to resemble subpoenas. It was an augury of things to come. Because at that very party David Kenner told a television interviewer that Harry-O had been a founder of the label—a statement that soon caught the attention of the FBI, which desperately wanted to connect the rap label to drug money.

Shortly after the rollout party, Dr. Dre completed work on *The Chronic*. Everyone who heard the tapes knew it was groundbreaking work. But when Sony was offered a chance to distribute the record, it refused, cowering under the storm stirred up by the likes of Tipper Gore over the explicit lyrics and militant politics of rap music. BMI also refused to distribute it. Finally, Knight took the album to Interscope Records, an LA-based outfit run by Ted Field (the heir of the Marshall/Fields department store fortune) and rock producer Jimmy Iovine. Interscope was about to go under at the time and Iovine, in particular, recognized on the basis of *The Chronic* demos that making a deal with Death Row might offer a glorious reprieve.

Interscope bet right. *The Chronic* went multi-platinum and unveiled one of rap's biggest new stars, Snoop Dogg. His first album for Death Row, *Doggie Style*, also went double-platinum. As did Death Row's next four albums. Within a year, Death Row was raking in more than \$150 million in sales a year. And they had also lured into their stable rap's biggest name, Tupac Shakur. Shakur was

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in jail in New York City at the time and Suge Knight was the only one willing to bail him out. Shakur returned the favor by signing with Death Row and churning out a string of best-selling albums.

But behind the scenes all was not well. For starters, although Death Row was selling millions of records Michael Harris and his wife Lydia, who later served as an executive producer of the film, weren't seeing any money. They'd turned over all the business dealings to their attorney David Kenner. When Suge Knight publicly disavowed Harris and any link to his money, the Harrises realized that they had been betrayed by both Knight and their own lawyer.

Meanwhile, the political attacks on rap music continued to escalate, with Bob Dole and Dan Quayle both making Time/Warner's stake in Interscope a campaign issue. Enter C. Dolores Tucker, the prudish marm of the NAACP. Welcome to Death Row claims that Tucker attempted to parlay attacks on rap into a cushy deal with Time/Warner which would involve her overseeing an \$80 million label with Tucker acting as censor of lyrical content. Apparently, Tucker convinced Michael Fuchs, head of Time/Warner's music division, that she could swing Suge Knight on this deal. A meeting was arranged at Dionne Warwick's mansion. Suge stood them up. Tucker went away empty handed and Time/Warner ended up selling Interscope back to Iovine and Field.

But for all the money that was changing hands (some \$400 million) little of it was making its way back to the artists. Even Dr. Dre, the creative force behind the label, wasn't getting his share and found it impossible to record records in the Death Row studios, which had become clotted with gang members and Knight's thuggish entourage. Snoop Dogg described the situation at the studio as "Everybody being in a chokehold." Ultimately, Dre left Death Row records. It was the beginning of the end.

The fateful day was September 7, 1996, when Tupac Shakur, under police

and FBI surveillance, was gunned down in Las Vegas, with Suge Knight at his side. Knight was wounded and Shakur later died of his injuries. Earlier that evening Knight had gotten into a scuffle with a man in the lobby of casino. The fight was captured on videotape. The tape was used to charge Knight with a parole violation. For help, Knight turned to David Kenner. But it didn't help. Knight ended up getting hit with a 9-year sentence. Many Death Row employees think that Kenner didn't put forth much of a defense.

"Telling the story of Death Row records presented many unique challenges for anyone with the temerity to try," says Leigh Savidge. "The people close to this story generally fall into one of two categories: those who make out like bandits, aren't talking and want the story to simply fade away; and those who were misused, threatened and are simply relieved to have survived the experience."

The making of the film Welcome to Death Row was also of considerable interest to the FBI, which was looking to go after the financial backers of Death Row, who they suspected of being tied to drug traffickers. "At the time when a lot of the initial interviews were done, the government was investigating Death Row," says Leigh Savidge, the film's director. "There was grave, grave concern. They had been approached by the FBI [who] were looking to get [the interviewees] to say things about Death Row. In a sense, to connect Death Row to drug money. It was a tremendous amount of fear we faced in getting people to talk when we first started off."

There were also threats from people close to Suge Knight. Many of the rappers who agreed to be interviewed by Savidge, including artists as established as Snoop Dogg, got threats. "There are things that flash before you. I'm not somebody who sits at home at night and racks up fear about what's going to happen to me," Savidge said. "That's either a good thing or not a good thing, but nothing is gonna stop me from telling

this story and showing it to people and letting people get a sense of perspective on what happened."

In the end, the story of Death Row records isn't so different from many other stories of black artists and entrepreneurs who run into the subtle racism of Hollywood and the merciless profit-hunger of the entertainment industry, from its CEOs and producers to the lawyers. Most of the money from this incredibly successful label was made by two white men, Ted Fields and Jimmy Iovine. Many of the artists ended up broke, in jail or dead.

"They just don't want us legal", says rapper Rick James.

As for Suge Knight, he's looking to reconstruct his crumbled empire on the backs of those who helped him build it: "I'm still gonna make my money no matter what. I don't care who put out a record, who did what. If there is an artist on Death Row, my kids [are] still gonna eat off that. Death Row artists got Death Row babies, they got Death Row wives. They got everything they got because of Suge Knight and Death Row." CP

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restore order, President Bush I sent in the Marines. At the time cynics suggested that Bush might also have been eager to take his pardon of Caspar Weinberger out of the headlines.

The “humanitarian” intervention was touted as one of the first bouts of nation building of the New World Order, supervised by various non-profit aid groups and protected by the UN-sponsored military force. The American embassy, established a few days before the US marines arrived in Mogadishu, was located in the Conoco corporate compound.

Soon ugly stories of murder and torture by Canadian “peacekeepers” appeared in the Canadian press. To efface such unpleasantness the US press whipped up a frenzy about a local baron called Mohamed Aidede, touted as a sort of mini-Osama. He became public enemy number one, target of various efforts to kill or capture him. One such attempt focused on a house in which clan elders were holding a council, debating how to engineer a peaceful solution to the crisis. US helicopter gunships fired TOW missiles into the building, killing at least 50. US special forces then arrived and, on Scott Peterson’s on the spot account, finished off some wounded survivors.

On October 3, 1993, a team of Delta Force and Rangers tried to nab Aidede again, in central Mogadishu. Aidede was nowhere to be found and the American troops became confused. Shortly after, they were surrounded by angry crowds. There ensued a massacre in which somewhere between 500 and 1000 Somalis were killed, along with 18 Americans.

Aidede later told journalists that had he desired it, all the beleaguered Americans would have been killed by Somalis infuriated by the massacre. He held the number down, correctly fearing that Clinton would probably have ordered the nuking of Mogadishu forthwith.

In 1999, Mark Bowden’s book *Black Hawk Down* appeared. Bowden had worked for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and filed pieces right after the 1993 massacre. As the movie director Alex Cox points out

According to one journalistic account, US special forces killed wounded survivors--in an episode that definitively turned Somalis against the US.

in a recent, excellent discussion of *Black Hawk Down* in *The Independent*, “It’s interesting to observe how the story was retold over that time. An article by the former *Independent* correspondent Richard Dowden [not to be confused with Mark Bowden] the previous year makes the clear point that US troops killed unarmed men, women and children from the outset of their mission: ‘In one incident, Rangers took a family hostage. When one

of the women started screaming at the Americans, she was shot dead. In another incident, a Somali prisoner was allegedly shot dead when he refused to stop praying outside. Another was clubbed into silence. The killer is not identified.’”

Bowden’s original articles were filled with these unpleasant details. They are not to be found in the book. *CounterPunch* is reliably informed that the publisher, Grove Atlantic, thought it politic to remove them, preferring an unblemished epic of American heroism. The only blemish that disfigures the release of the movie is the fact that GI John “Stebby” Stebbins, renamed as Company Clerk John Grimes in the film, is now serving a 30-year sentence in Fort Leavenworth military prison for raping a 12-year-old girl.

Cox cites a subsequent US Army investigation of organised racism in the US Army, which concluded the problem was particularly serious in all-white, so-called “elite” and “Special Operations” units. Such racial separatism could lead to problems, the report warned, because it “foster[s] supremacist attitudes among white combat soldiers”. (The Secretary of the Army’s Task Force Report on Extremist Activities, *Defending American Values*, 21 March 1996, Washington DC, page 15.)

After the massacre, Canada, Italy and Belgium all held enquiries into the behavior of their troops. Canada put some of its soldiers on trial for torture and murder. The US held no such public investigation nor reprimanded any of its commanders or troops for the Somali debacle. CP

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