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# Buying In and Selling Out: African-American Ownership of Record Labels in the Twentieth Century

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BUYING IN AND SELLING OUT:  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN OWNERSHIP OF RECORD LABELS  
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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in

The Department of History

by  
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*To Warren,  
This one is for you*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Throughout the twentieth century, African-American owned record labels seemingly served as embodiments of entrepreneurialism's capacity to generate social uplift for the race as well as wealth. However, an examination of Black Swan Records, Motown, and Def Jam Records, demonstrates how this assertion is undermined by the actions of their owners.

Harry Pace founded Black Swan Records in 1921 not only to showcase black artists, but also prove the African-American audience was capable of appreciating classical music and other high culture. However, faced with financial pressures, Pace expanded the genres recorded on Black Swan to include jazz and other genres deemed "low" culture, as well as released records by white artists under black names.

Berry Gordy's refusal to allow his Motown artists to take a public stance on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s came from his belief that their participation would be detrimental to the company's profitability. Gordy's belief in selling black respectability to the commercial mainstream formed the basis of much of his decisions in running Motown, and became its ultimate legacy.

Although Russell Simmons sought to market black rebellion under the assumption white consumers would find it more authentic, his decisions made as owner of Def Jam was demonstrated how entrenched black music had become within mainstream culture. When artists went too far in their persona of rebellion, such as members of Public Enemy, Simmons was quick to cast them aside in order to preserve the label's viability.

The three owner's actions to remain commercially successful despite seemingly in opposition to their stated cultural and racial goals demonstrate the priority of economic realities inherent in consumer culture taking precedence over idealistic efforts. In commodifying race, the resulting music was foremost a commercial product, and diminished its cultural value. This work challenges earlier studies of African-American popular music by arguing that the positive attributes of presenting black artists to a mainstream audience were weakened by the economic considerations of running a business and the demands of a consumer culture.

## INTRODUCTION

On August 23, 1900, a group of African-American professionals from across the country met in Boston, Massachusetts for the first annual meeting of the National Negro Business League. Over the course of two days, exhibitors gave presentations on black-owned businesses in coal mining, potato farming, undertaking, floristry, and a host of other diverse industries.<sup>1</sup> In addition, presenters forecasted the business outlook for black enterprise across the nation. The attendees of the annual meeting came at the bequest of Booker T. Washington, who had organized the league. Washington had achieved national notoriety for his “Atlanta Compromise” speech delivered at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition, five years before, in which he advocated for mechanical and agricultural work as the method by which African-Americans could ultimately achieve social equality with white people. Washington also recognized that black owned businesses served as an important means through which African-Americans could demonstrate their value to the rest of America. Washington invited all black businessmen to join the league, whose ranks included lawyers, doctors, and small business owners as well as farmers and craftsmen. The League formally incorporated in New York City the following year and eventually grew to include hundreds of individual chapters throughout the nation.

Washington was not alone among African-American thinkers at the turn of the century emphasizing the necessity of black-owned businesses to gain equality. Even W.E.B. Dubois, who typically opposed Washington, agreed that black-owned

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<sup>1</sup> Records of the National Negro Business League. Black Studies Research Sources. Microfilm. Bracey, John and Meier, August eds. University Publications of America. 5.



businesses should be a major hallmark of any plan to achieve civil rights. The Declaration of Principles, drafted by Dubois and William Monroe Trotter after the inaugural 1905 meeting of the Niagara Movement, decried the South's prejudice in oppressing small business enterprise and impeding advancement. This rhetoric was continued in the platform adopted by the National Negro Committee in 1909. The Committee, which would change its name to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People the following year, similarly stated that the transition of a primarily unskilled black labor force into skilled labor was a key focus. The stress on black enterprise was felt throughout the African-American community with later organizations, such as Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, continuing this emphasis on black ownership of businesses throughout the early part of the twentieth century.

Encouraging black entrepreneurialism as a tent pole for a larger push for greater Civil Rights continued throughout the twentieth century. As black entrepreneurs gained more financial success and notoriety, it was believed that their individual achievements would translate into increased equality for the rest of the race. Organizations such as the National Negro Business League perpetuated this idea. The League, which changed its name to the National Business League in 1967, still exists, with goals virtually identical to those set down by Washington in 1900. Its website states its vision is to "Empower and Uplift the Black Community through Business and Economic Development" and its mission is "to Create Wealth in and for the Black community"<sup>2</sup> The continued existence of the League demonstrates the

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<sup>2</sup> "National Business League Vision". Retrieved 11/12/16. <http://nblgw.org/the-nbl-s-vision>

pervasiveness of this idea through the years. This belief that the economic growth of black entrepreneurialism would correlate with an increased social elevation for the whole of the race became prevalent in African-American society throughout the twentieth century, and impact the development of several businesses.

The burgeoning recording industry seemed an ideal laboratory to test the potency of black entrepreneurialism for four main reasons. First, the medium as a whole was still relatively new. Although Thomas Edison had first introduced electronic recordings with his 1877 invention of the phonograph, other companies such as Columbia and Victor came up with their own imitations. At the time of the first meeting of the National Negro Business League in 1900, these companies comprised the “Big Three” of recording devices and held most of the patents and national distribution over the record business. This resulted in Edison, Columbia, and Victor holding a virtual monopoly on recorded music. This oligarchical control stood until the mid-1910s, when a series of successful lawsuits and patent expirations allowed for new record labels to be formed.

Secondly, although the record industry was newly expanded, the business of selling music had already proven to be lucrative. Manufacturers of printed music and musical instruments had grown immensely in the beginning of the twentieth century. By the end of World War I, American music industries had produced more than \$335 million in goods.<sup>3</sup> Eager customers purchased pianos, sheet music, and other musical merchandise in droves, and musical recordings were posed to

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<sup>3</sup> David Suisman. “Co-Workers in the Kingdom of Culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music.” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 90, No. 4 (Mar., 2004), 1296.

continue this trend. Although established musicians were at first hesitant to record, fearing the poor sound quality of the recordings would misrepresent their skill, their cautiousness waned in light of the fame and fortune achieved by those who did record.

Thirdly, the striking down of the old dominance of the “Big Three” through lawsuits and patent expirations also made it much cheaper for entrepreneurs to enter into the record business. Budding music impresarios no longer had to create their own recording process or medium in order to create records. Instead, they could utilize the technology already developed, which was now available after decades of Edison, Columbia, and Victor’s control. The reduced cost of entering into the record business benefitted aspiring black businesspersons, who typically had less methods of obtaining preliminary capital. Although the cost of creating a new recording process had been prohibitively high, its newfound availability allowed black entrepreneurs access into a field previously unattainable.

Finally, recorded songs and their performers became bona fide cultural phenomenon, impacting American pop culture a great deal. Recording musicians became celebrities, and their image generated through the consumer medium became their dominant portrayal. While live performances had previously been viewed as the overriding proof of musicianship, recorded music began to take precedence. Through the successful sale of records, African-Americans could not only generate financial benefit, but also create positive images of black people in American society. Although previous depictions of black musicians had perpetuated ideas of racial inferiority, the development of a new medium allowed for the chance

to replace the old stereotypes with depictions that better reflected the positive attributes of the race. Through the successful sale of records, African-Americans could not only generate financial benefit, but also create affirmative images of black people in American society. Because of its newness, lucrativeness, relative cheapness, and capacity for contributing both economically and culturally, the flourishing record business seemed perfect for black entrepreneurialism.

This dissertation seeks to examine the impact of this belief on African-American owned record labels with national distribution throughout the twentieth century, and whether or not they fulfilled the expectation promised by proponents of black entrepreneurialism. It combines elements of biography, economic history, African-American history, social history, cultural history, and music history in order to best illuminate the lives of these entrepreneurs, the companies they led, and their impact upon society as a whole. African-American owned record labels are the focus of inquiry because they tended to be the most visible of black businesses and often the most financially successful. In particular, this study focuses on three record labels and their owners. The first is Black Swan Records, started in 1920 by Harry Pace, a protégé of Dubois. Pace was the first African-American to own a record label with national distribution, and even though Black Swan ultimately had only a very short existence, its failure affected the manner by which subsequent labels would market themselves. Berry Gordy's Motown Records, formed in 1959, became the largest and most lucrative of all black-owned businesses in the 1960s, and has been held up as the exemplar for the potency of black entrepreneurialism. Motown would come to dominate popular music for all races in the 1960s and created a legacy of

purveying sanitized images of blackness for a mainstream audience. In the 1980s, Def Jam Records, co-founded by Russell Simmons, supplanted Motown as the largest black-owned record label, and became synonymous with Hip-Hop culture. Def Jam embodied a brash depiction of rebellion, yet still espoused the same ideals of racial uplift through economic success. These record labels all had national (and international) distribution, which allowed for the largest number of consumers to listen to their wares and therefore to have the most impact upon mainstream depictions of black culture. In addition, catering to a national market meant the products and their images had to have universal appeal, as opposed to satisfying regional or local tastes.

There have been numerous studies of African-American business owners and entrepreneurialism within the black community. The first in-depth studies of the phenomenon were sociological works written by Dubois in the late nineteenth-century. His first, 1898's *Some Efforts of American Negroes for Their Own Social Betterment*, focused primarily on schools, churches, and charitable organizations, but also included businesses as organizations founded by African-Americans to provide social uplift.<sup>4</sup> Dubois' definition of "business" was quite fluid, however, including clergy, educators, and club members as embodiments of business success. Although Dubois' criteria for what constituted a business was initially broad, he was particular in the correlation between the business' success and the overall well

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<sup>4</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, ed., *Some Efforts of American Negroes for Their Own Social Betterment. Report of an Investigation under the Direction of Atlanta University; Together with the Proceedings of the Third Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, held at Atlanta University, May 25-26, 1898* (Atlanta, Ga., 1898); accessed 3/26/16 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/DuBoisau/menu.html>.

being of the race. Dubois strongly advised African-Americans interested in starting a business to band together into cooperatives, believing that the communalism would best benefit the race as a whole. Dubois' beliefs manifested throughout much of the development of the concept of black entrepreneurialism. In short, black entrepreneurialism was not only the formation of a business by a black individual to make a profit, but also the additional expectation that the profitability of this business should in turn elevate the collective prospects of the race. It is this definition of "black entrepreneurialism" that will be used in this dissertation, not simply the economic model of black ownership of a business, but the additional social expectation for said business throughout the black community. Although this idea evolved throughout the twentieth century, the supposed correlation between personal income and collective uplift persisted.

Subsequent studies promote the same idea of collective racial uplift through individual economic success. For instance, John Sibley Butler's 1991 work *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help Among Black Americans: A Reconsideration of Race and Economics* utilizes statistics and a sociological study to examine why so many black-owned small businesses failed, before prescribing methods by which African-Americans could self-improve in order to change these failures in the conclusion.<sup>5</sup> Such prescriptive rhetoric is common in most other studies of black entrepreneurialism. Previous studies of African-American owned record labels have tended to focus solely upon a single label and not upon the development of the business model over time. Likewise, aside from encyclopedic articles and timelines

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<sup>5</sup> John Sibley Butler. *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help Among Black Americans: A Reconsideration of Race and Economics*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991)

on the progress of black business executives, Pace, Gordy, and Simmons have not been previously studied collectively and compared as a trio. To be fair, there have been numerous instances upon which Simmons has been likened to Gordy, but Pace's inclusion as another figure for comparison has hitherto not occurred.

This dissertation will examine these owners as the driving force behind their enterprises and the primary decision makers for the business. It is divided into three sections, each with two chapters. The first chapter is a chronological examination of the life of the individual entrepreneur as well as their record label, while the second is an examination of the owner's economic and cultural decisions made in running the label. Harry Pace and Black Swan Records are the focus of the first section. Pace started Black Swan Records with the idealistic goal of demonstrating how African-American purchasing power could support a record label that solely employed black persons. In addition, Pace believed black customers' enjoyment of certain "high-culture" genres, like opera and religious music, would demonstrate to the white mainstream that black people were capable of appreciating such music and would ultimately lead to acceptance and equality. However, despite his lofty goals, Pace deliberately released records of white artists performing under black pseudonyms. The question as to why Pace would willingly undertake such an action so contrary to the label's stated objectives frames the study of Black Swan, as well as Pace himself.

Of the three entities covered in this dissertation, Harry Pace and his Black Swan Records have attracted by far the least amount of previous scholarship. Partially, this is because to Black Swan's relative obscurity in comparison to the

record labels that came decades later, which tended to have more notoriety and financial success. Still, Pace has been viewed as embodying early black entrepreneurialism and as a close disciple of DuBois. Although Black Swan Records only lasted a few years, it tends to dominate investigations on Pace, who had a much lengthier career as an insurance executive than he did at selling records.

Additionally, Pace's business practices with ragtime composer W.C. Handy usually result in Pace being portrayed in a dim light in studies on Handy. Pace also has been portrayed negatively for his decision to "pass" for white late in life.

Two works provide the best introduction to Black Swan and Harry Pace, its owner. The first is a 2004 article in the *Journal of American History* by David Suisman, entitled "Co-Workers in the Kingdom of Culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music."<sup>6</sup> Large selections of the article became a chapter, also about Pace and Black Swan, in Suisman's 2012 book *Selling Sounds: The Commerical Revolution in American Music*.<sup>7</sup> Suisman generally focuses on the radicalism of Pace's designs for Black Swan, believing Pace was an idealist who sought to change the perception of African American culture through the success of his label's productions of operatic arias and other "high" culture genres. Although Suisman makes mention of Pace's practice of releasing white artists on the label under assumed black names, he does not dwell on it or find it hypocritical to the idealistic goals of Pace. Indeed, he finds the action "demonstrated the

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<sup>6</sup> David Suisman. "Co-Workers in the Kingdom of Culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music." *The Journal of American History* Vol. 90, No. 4 (Mar., 2004), 1295-1324

<sup>7</sup> David Suisman. *Selling Sounds: The Commerical Revolution in American Music*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012)



speciousness of racial boundaries in music.”<sup>8</sup> In addition, Suisman makes mention of Pace’s relationship with W.E.B. Dubois but does not extensively delve into their decades-long correspondence as a source to understand Pace’s motivations.

The second major piece of scholarship on Black Swan Records is *Black Swan: The Record Label of the Harlem Renaissance* written primarily by head writer Helge Thygesen with assistance by Mark Berresford and Russ Shor.<sup>9</sup> The 1996 work is highlighted by an extensive catalog of all of Black Swan’s releases, as well as those done by Olympic Records, a white label acquired by Pace shortly before Black Swan’s ultimate demise. In addition, the book republishes several advertisements for Black Swan Records, originally printed in the *Chicago Defender* and the NAACP’s *The Crisis*. Despite holding a wealth of raw information, the authors of *Black Swan: The Record Label of the Harlem Renaissance* give little context for their data. A sparse biographical summary of Pace’s life is given, and the book does not go into Pace’s racial and cultural aspirations for starting the label.

The second section of this dissertation is centered on Berry Gordy and Motown Records. Founded decades after Black Swan’s demise, Motown Records found lucrative success in selling Gordy’s vision of black respectability to a mainstream audience. Gordy initially had a tight-fisted control over his artists’ public persona and their music, and purposefully groomed them as to be as inoffensive as possible in order to maintain his vision of what he believed would be

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<sup>8</sup> Suisman. “Co-Workers in the Kingdom of Culture” 1320.

<sup>9</sup> Helge Thygesen, , Mark Berresford, and Russ Shor. *Black Swan: the Record Label of the Harlem Renaissance: A History and Catalogue Listing including Olympic Records and Associated Labels*. (Nottingham: VJM Publications, 1996)

most profitable. Despite existing concurrently with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Gordy remained ambivalent towards the movement and refused to allow his performers to publically support such efforts. Even though Motown had a working relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., such an association did not equate with a willingness of Gordy's to fully embrace the movement. Delving into the rationale behind Gordy's position, as well as the manner by which he framed the public perception of Motown as a business and its artists, demonstrates Gordy's zeal in maintaining the appearance of respectability.

Unlike his predecessor at Black Swan, Berry Gordy and his Motown Records have a wealth of information available. Gordy's penchant for publicity has resulted in scads of interviews, magazine pieces, newspaper articles, and other forms of media for scholars to utilize. Most work on Motown has focused primarily on the music itself, and gives the artists a great deal of agency and creative control in terms of their stance on the Civil Rights Movement. Gordy is almost universally depicted as having an extreme level of control over his artists' music and public persona, yet his power does not translate into their opinions on Civil Rights. Some have gone so far as to suggest Gordy was actively participating in the Civil Rights Movement through Motown and his artists, and used his influence over pop culture to subvert white images of black people. This view is most forcibly argued in Suzanne E. Smith's 2001 book *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*.<sup>10</sup> For Smith, Gordy was a close ally of the Civil Rights Movement and acted as another front through which African American musicians and office staff could change public

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<sup>10</sup> Suzanne Smith. *Dancing in the Streets: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009)

perception of the race. She finds Gordy's public ambivalence towards the movement a tactic masking his genuine adherence in order to appear less threatening to the white consumer base.

Outside of his complex stance on the Civil Rights issue, Gordy has been viewed as an executive who wielded a great deal of control over his artists. Scholars tend to view this level of control as either exemplary or abysmal. For instance, in his 1986 work *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, Nelson George praises Gordy's dominance over the label and highlights it as the primary reason behind the label's success.<sup>11</sup> George concludes Gordy's relinquishing power over Motown caused of the loss of the label's previous mystique, leaving it little different than any other music label. Gerald Posner is less complementary in his 2005 release *Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power*. Posner finds Motown's success was often times impeded by Gordy's business ineptitude and pettiness towards his artists.<sup>12</sup> For Posner, Gordy's authority over Motown's artists came from a place of inferiority: he often depicts Gordy as threatened by being surrounded by more talented and competent persons. Although all studies of Motown recognize the financial success and cultural impact of the label, they differ on whether Gordy played a significant role or was the beneficiary of talent so palpable that even he could not mismanage it.

The final section of the dissertation is on Russell Simmons, Def Jam Records, and the artists he managed. Unlike Gordy, Simmons sought to sell rebellion to the

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<sup>11</sup> Nelson George. *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise & Fall of the Motown Sound*, (London: Omnibus, 1986)

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Posner. *Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power*. (New York: Random House, 2005)

mainstream audience and believed white consumers would find black rebellion, as presented by the artists he managed, to be the most authentic. Through his ownership of Def Jam Records, as well as the artists managed by his company Rush Management, Simmons' intense devotion to capitalism frames nearly every element of his public persona and creative endeavors. However, the centrality of making money is not contrary to Simmons' artistic integrity, but rather demonstrates the pervasive manner by which American capitalism ultimately dominates over issues of race, class, and geography. Once racial identity is commodified, the resulting product becomes like any other available on the marketplace, and any aspirations of collective uplift are overridden. Still, based upon Simmons' attempts to market his artists to the mainstream, as well as the racial make-up of Def Jam's key staffers, questions arise as to whether Def Jam could truly be considered a "black" record label. The ambiguousness of Def Jam's racial identity, coupled with Simmons' own adherence to continual selling, demonstrate how engrained music performed by black artists on record labels owned by black executives have become in American consumer culture.

Although maintaining a high public profile, there have been relatively few studies on Russell Simmons or Def Jam Records. This is not to say either entity is ignored in the scholarship, but they are rarely the primary targets of investigation. Instead, most scholarship focuses on the rappers signed to Def Jam and gives them a great deal of agency over their lyrics and persona, with the label and Russell Simmons depicted simply as the means by which rappers get on the air. Rap lyrics and the imagery of music videos have similarly been studied extensively, primarily

for their effect on listeners and the society at large, but rap executives and labels are similarly downplayed in their centrality of the production of such materials. For instance, in Margaret Hunter's "Shake It, Baby, Shake It: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip-Hop," Hunter delves into the correlation between an increase of sexual imagery in rap videos with the growth of commercial partnerships between rappers and global corporations.<sup>13</sup> Although Hunter mentions numerous rappers and their endorsement deals with various companies, she does not include the label to whom the rapper was signed as privy to any of the negotiations. For Hunter, and many other scholars, rappers function as independent entities, able to make economic decisions on their own with no oversight or control from label executives or other business concerns.

In the instances where Simmons is singled out for examination, writers tend to take a very dim view of him. Ta-Nehisi Coates' 2003 article "Compa\$\$ionate Capitali\$m" embodies much of the criticism leveled at Simmons.<sup>14</sup> Coates depicts Simmons as duplicitous, even hawking his own energy drink at a rally ostensibly for voter registration. Coates does not find this incident to be an isolated one, but so ingrained into Simmons' character that it even seeps into Simmons' ordinary speaking pattern. "His cadence is rough and abrupt;" Coates writes, "words issue from him with the grace and elegance of an avalanche. But it's his candor, even his fondness for profanity, that allows him to spin you, even if he isn't trying to."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret Hunter. "Shake It, Baby, Shake It: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip-Hop." *Sociological Perspectives* Vol. 54, No. 1 (Spring 2011), p. 15-36

<sup>14</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates. "Compa\$\$ionate Captiali\$m" *The Village Voice*. December 30, 2003. Retrieved 10/13/15. <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/compa-ionate-capitali-m-6397553>

Although Coates does not disparage Simmons for his business dealings, he doubts Simmons' merger of commercialism and politics would ultimately result in any lasting change outside of an increase in Simmons' own personal notoriety and wealth. Coates is not unique in his summation of Simmons, with most other studies concluding that Simmons' intense capitalistic streak overwhelms any of his other ventures.

As a label, Def Jam has proved to be an intriguing topic for a variety of scholars. Of all the books written about the label, Stacy Gueraseva's 2005 work *Def Jam Inc.: Russell Simmons, Rick Rubin, and the Extraordinary Story of the World's Most Influential Hip-Hop Label* has been the most extensive look at Def Jam.<sup>16</sup> Gueraseva does an admirable job in depicting the founding of the label, as well as the early life of its co-founders, Simmons and Rick Rubin. However, Gueraseva places an inordinate amount of emphasis on the artists themselves, holding they typically operated outside of any real boundaries when it came to their music and lyrics. In addition, Gueraseva gives a great deal of importance to artists, such as Third Bass, who were otherwise not noteworthy or financially significant to the overall success of the label. Although *Def Jam Inc.* is an exhaustive study, its emphasis on the artists over the executives fails to take into account the amount of power Simmons actually wielded.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Stacy Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.: Russell Simmons, Rick Rubin, and the Extraordinary Story of the World's Most Influential Hip-Hop Label*. (New York: One World/Ballantine, 2005)

Despite the persistence of the idealism of the National Negro Business League since its foundation, it remains that promoting black entrepreneurialism does not correlate with uplift for the African-American community as a whole. As demonstrated by these record executives and their labels, the success of the individual does not necessarily equate to collective benefits. In addition, these labels push aside racial identity and ideals of uplift in favor of the economic realities of keeping a business solvent. When race is commodified as an element of consumer culture, it eventually becomes subservient to financial concerns. Any attempts to maintain a self-imposed racial separation in the marketplace are essentially detrimental since they can turn away potential customers. As such, these black-owned record labels ultimately became indistinguishable from any other label, and demonstrate the futility of believing racial uplift can come through a consumer enterprise. This is not to say that such efforts are foolhardy, as personal economic gain can be admirable, but such individual success will not correspond to a similar elevation of a whole race.

Despite not achieving the stated goal of collective economic uplift for the black community, these record executives were not failures. Their enterprises did reap benefits for African-Americans. Aside from the financial gains and exposure of the individual performers, the notoriety generated by these record labels raised the collective profile of African-Americans. Likewise, the success illustrated the inclusion of black American culture into the mainstream American consumer culture. Furthermore, these labels exemplified how black culture also appropriated American consumer culture as well. The success of black-owned record labels does

not just demonstrate how the predominantly white mainstream accepted African-American ideas, but also how members of the black community were willing to adopt the economic and cultural expectations of American popular culture. The study of Black Swan, Motown, and Def Jam does not just provide insight on the manner by which African-Americans framed their attempts to achieve equality, but also how black culture became accepted within mainstream consumer culture. By looking at the executives behind the artists, men who had a great deal of control over the music and image of their labels, a more accurate picture of black artistry emerges. Black musicians signed to black-owned record labels were not given full autonomy, rather they had to yield to the economic and cultural considerations of the label owners. It was these considerations that shaped the decisions of Harry Pace, Berry Gordy, and Russell Simmons, and have had an immense impact on the depiction of African-Americans not only in the music business, but in society as a whole. In short, by buying into American consumer culture, these entrepreneurs had to sell out their cultural aspirations for the race.



## CHAPTER ONE: HARRY PACE AND BLACK SWAN RECORDS: 1921-1923

“DON’T BE DECEIVED!” the advertisement warned, “BLACK SWAN RECORDS Are the Only Exclusive Colored Records and Are Made by a Colored Company.” The ad, which appeared in the July 15, 1922 issue of the *Chicago Defender*, was typical for Black Swan’s advertisements. It highlighted not only the label’s black management, but also the plethora of black artists working for the company, including Ethel Waters, a discovery of Black Swan and the label’s biggest star. Although white record labels employed black musicians, Black Swan touted its commitment as the only black-owned record company to bring high quality and high-class records performed by black musicians for a black audience.

Ironically, despite their warning to readers not to be deceived by other record labels, Black Swan itself was deceptive in its ad. Among the records listed as part of Black Swan’s August 1922 releases is “Honey Rose” along with its B-side “Mandy ‘N Me” preformed by Mamie Jones. Yet, such an artist did not exist. “Mamie Jones” was actually white singer Aileen Stanley, who under her own name also recorded for white record labels. The deception of passing off white artists as black in the advertisement did not end with Mamie Jones. “Fred Smith’s Society Orchestra” was actually the all-white Lindsay McPhail’s Jazz Band.<sup>1</sup> Even “Ethel Waters’ Jazz Masters” was a cover for two white groups: the Palace Trio and Van Eps Quartette.

At the root of this deception was Harry H. Pace, owner of Black Swan records, responsible for the company’s racial attitude, and the public persona of the record

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<sup>1</sup> David Suisman. “Co-Workers in the Kingdom of Culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music” *Journal of American History*, March 2004.1320.

label. Although Pace founded Black Swan records with the intention of elevating black society, it is his experience as a businessman and the choices he made in order to succeed economically that illuminate the rationale behind the “black-face” deception.

Harry Hebert Pace was born on January 6, 1884 in Covington, Georgia. Showing an aptitude for academics, Pace finished primary school in Covington at age twelve before moving on to Atlanta University, where he graduated as valedictorian at age nineteen in 1903.<sup>2</sup> While in college, Pace served as a printer’s apprentice and became adept at writing, as well as the publishing business. It was at Atlanta University that he met W.E.B. Dubois, a most fortuitous personal relationship that would aid him greatly throughout his career. Dubois was one of Pace’s teachers at the university and would remain a presence throughout Pace’s life, both as mentor and business partner. In addition, the two men had a friendly regular correspondence lasting several decades.

Following graduation, Pace worked as a teacher at the Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia before moving to Memphis in 1904 to aid in the launch of a literary magazine, *The Moon Illustrated Weekly*, for W.E.B. Dubois.<sup>3</sup> The weekly magazine was similar in form and content to Dubois’ and the NAACP’s later *The Crisis*, containing articles of interest for a literate and upwardly mobile African American audience.<sup>4</sup> According to a letter to Pace, Dubois felt quite positive about the literary

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<sup>2</sup> *The Bulletin of Atlanta University*, 1903 no. 138, 1. HBCU Library Alliance. <http://contentdm.auctr.edu/cdm/ref/collection/rwwl/id/1271>. Accessed 4/7/14.

<sup>3</sup> Cary D Wintz & Paul Finkelman, eds. *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, Volume 2. (London: Taylor & Francis Books, 2004) 946-947.

enterprise, believing *The Moon* could become profitable for all parties involved as well as becoming a well-respected journal with a national reach.<sup>5</sup> Under Dubois' urging, Pace came to Memphis in order to be closer to Ed Simon, the publisher who was to serve as the financier of this venture.

Although Dubois had high aspirations for the magazine, *The Moon Illustrated Weekly* ultimately failed, publishing only thirty-four issues from December 1905 to early August 1906.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the magazine had a low circulation, with between 250 and 500 subscribers. Despite Dubois' goal of *The Moon* achieving national reach, it was sold only in Memphis and Atlanta.<sup>7</sup>

*The Moon's* woes were compounded by a conflict between its two main officers, Pace and Simon. Following the failure of the magazine, Simon wrote to Dubois placing the blame on the magazine's demise solely on Pace. Simon found that although Dubois sent Pace to work pragmatically on raising the magazine's circulation, "during the whole time, he never spent a whole week outside of this office. The whole thing was top-heavy. There was so much brain and dignity in the business that no one could ask for a subscriber."<sup>8</sup> Although Simon believed salvaging

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<sup>4</sup> John N. Ingham & Lynne B. Feldman. *African-American Business Leaders: a Biographical Dictionary*. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1994) 502.

<sup>5</sup> W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to H. H. Pace, ca. April 3, 1904. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. The entirety of the archive is available on microfilm as well as through the University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries' website: <http://www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/dubois/>.

<sup>6</sup> University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. Duboisopedia. [http://www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/duboisopedia/doku.php?id=about:moon\\_illustrated\\_weekly](http://www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/duboisopedia/doku.php?id=about:moon_illustrated_weekly) accessed 4/14/14.

<sup>7</sup> Carolyn Wedin. *Encyclopedia of African American History 1896 to Present*. s.v. "Moon Illustrated Weekly" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 373-374.

the *Moon* could result in financial success, such success was only obtainable by eliminating Pace from the enterprise. Were that not to occur, Simon wished for Dubois and Pace to buy out his share of the business.<sup>9</sup> To Dubois, Pace defended himself against Simon's accusations, stating: "I worked night and day until worn out from loss of sleep, over work, and lack of nourishment due to my two meals a day. I discontinued *The Moon* from sheer physical exhaustion."<sup>10</sup> Although Pace never denied he was the individual that ceased the publication of *The Moon*, he finds Simon's neglect of the magazine was the reason behind its failure.<sup>11</sup> Although both Pace and Simon deferred to Dubois as mediator and sought Dubois as an ally in the disagreement, Dubois preferred to take a more neutral approach.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the three parties dissolved the partnership in 1907.<sup>13</sup>

After the failure of the *Moon Illustrated Weekly*, Pace moved to Jefferson City, Missouri in 1906, where he accepted a position at the Lincoln Institute, a black

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<sup>8</sup> Ed. L. Simon & Co.. Letter from Ed. L. Simon & Co. to W. E. B. Du Bois, December 22, 1906. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. The entirety of the archive is available on microfilm as well as through the University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries' website: <http://www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/dubois/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ed. L. Simon & Co.. Letter from Ed. L. Simon & Co. to W. E. B. Du Bois, January 30, 1907. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Pace. 1884-1943. Letter from H. H. Pace to W. E. B. Du Bois, February 13, 1907. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Ed. L. Simon & Co., February 4, 1907. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>13</sup> W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Ed. L. Simon & Co., March 11, 1907. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

college, as professor of Latin and Greek. Pace stayed at the college for one year before Solvent Savings Bank, a black bank in Memphis, offered him a job as cashier. Before the bank would give Pace the position however, he had to secure a \$10,000 bond.<sup>14</sup> On the third of November, 1907, Pace wrote to his mentor, distraught about the lack of availability of such a sum: "I have met with the white surety companies and have been met with a courteous refusal because I am a Negro...I have no wealthy relations and I am almost at my rope's end."<sup>15</sup> Making a prompt response three days later, Dubois suggested a few wealthy individuals whom Pace could approach for assistance. Dubois also advised the use of northern companies and fraternal organizations in order to secure aid.<sup>16</sup> Despite Dubois' suggestions, Pace was unable to secure the entire bond by the beginning of 1908. Fortunately for Pace, in late January 1908, he was able to secure the full bond with the National Surety Company, a white company, albeit with a premium in excess of what was given to white customers in a similar situation.<sup>17</sup>

Pace's time as cashier for Solvent Savings was profitable for both the bank and himself. During Pace's five years at the bank, the assets of Solvent Savings grew

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<sup>14</sup> Although Pace does not detail to Dubois in their correspondence the nature of the bond, it was more than likely some form of a fidelity bond.

<sup>15</sup> Harry Pace, 1884-1943. Letter from H. H. Pace to W. E. B. Du Bois, November 3, 1907. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>16</sup> W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to H. H. Pace, November 6, 1907. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>17</sup> Harry Pace, 1884-1943. Letter from H. H. Pace to W. E. B. Du Bois, January 28, 1908. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

from \$50,000 to \$600,000.<sup>18</sup> In addition to his work at the bank, Pace honed his abilities as singer and lyricist. Pace's burgeoning interest in music was cemented by a fortuitous relationship he made at the bank. The musician, composer, and bandleader W.C. Handy was a customer of the bank and took a liking to Pace. Handy would later describe Pace as "a handsome young man of striking personality and definite musical leanings" who had "written some first-rate song lyrics and was in demand as a solo vocalist at church programs and Sunday night concerts,"<sup>19</sup> The two began collaborating in 1907 and published their first song together "In the Cotton Fields of Old Dixie" the same year.<sup>20</sup> The song, published by the Cincinnati firm of George Jaberg, marked the beginning of Pace and Handy's partnership. The two continued to write songs together, before in 1912 becoming business partners publishing sheet music as the Pace & Handy Music Company. This enterprise was to be a part-time job for Pace, as he kept his position at Solvent Savings. In addition to publishing sheet music together, Pace became Handy's business manager, taking charge of the musician's booking and finances.

The first hit for the new company was aptly named "Memphis Blues," released in 1912. Written by Handy, the song launched the musician into national notoriety and became the company's greatest success. Handy followed "Memphis Blues" by composing "Jogo Blues" and "The Girl You Never Met" in 1913 and "St.

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<sup>18</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, ed. *Encyclopedia of African American Business*, Volume 1, s.v. "Harry H. Pace", (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006) 631.

<sup>19</sup> W. C Handy, and Arna Bontemps. *Father of the Blues, An Autobiography*. (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1941) 125.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Muir, *Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America, 1850-1920*. (Champaign, Il: Unversity of Illinois Press, 2010) 111.

Louis Blues” in 1914.<sup>21</sup> In addition to Handy’s own compositions, the company published the songs of other musicians, typically other blues numbers, but also diversified into other genres, such as ballads and novelty songs. Aside from Pace and Handy themselves, the company employed other musicians and office staff including composer William Grant Still as the head arranger, J. Russell Robinson as the business manager, and Daniel Haynes as the chief bookkeeper.<sup>22</sup> By the time the company relocated to New York City in 1918, The Pace & Handy Music Company had between fifteen and twenty employees, including musician Fletcher Henderson, who joined the company in the Spring of 1920 as pianist, song plugger, and demonstrator, and over forty songs in its catalog, available as sheet music for orchestra and single piano, as well as piano rolls.<sup>23</sup>

The burgeoning success of the Pace & Handy Music Company was not enough for Pace to devote himself full time to the enterprise. In the spring of 1912, Pace left Solvent Savings Bank following the death of Robert R. Church, the bank’s owner and president.<sup>24</sup> Pace then received a job offer from Dubois. Despite the failure of the *Moon Illustrated Weekly*, Dubois offered his former pupil a position with Dubois’ newest literary endeavor, *The Crisis*. Dubois wrote to Pace on April 3, 1912, “It will

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Encyclopedia of African American Business*, Volume 1, s.v. “Harry H. Pace”, 632.

<sup>22</sup> David Davis & Ivo Dee Loo. “Black Swan Records- 1921-1924: From Swanky Swan to a Dead Duck” May 2002, Open University of the Netherlands. 2.  
<<http://www.ou.nl/Docs/Faculteiten/MW/MW%20Working%20Papers/GR03-04.pdf>> Accessed 4/15/14.

<sup>23</sup> “Advertisement in *The Crusader*” Pace & Handy Music Co. [Incorporated]; [The leading Colored music publishers]; Gaiety Theatre building, 1547 Broadway, New York. New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division. <<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1232439>> Accessed 4/15/14.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *Encyclopedia of African American Business*, Volume 1, s.v. “Harry H. Pace”, 632.

be hard work, but I believe it will in the end be an enterprise of gigantic proportions,” Dubois then listed the magazine’s income for its first 5 months. From November 1911 through March 1912, the magazine monthly income grew from \$803.44 to \$1305.61. In addition, Dubois estimated regular monthly expenses to be around \$1065.<sup>25</sup> Dubois offered Pace the position of either ‘business manager’ or ‘travelling representative’ at a salary of \$100 per month plus travel expenses. Pace’s job “for the first one or two years...(was to) raise circulation of the Crisis from 20,000 to 100,000 by travelling over the country.”<sup>26</sup> Most fortuitous for Pace, after serving two years on the road, Dubois offered, “...you might come into the office and take general charge of the business thus relieving myself.”<sup>27</sup> Although Pace never accepted the position at *the Crisis*, Dubois’ generous offer demonstrates the high esteem in which he held Pace, as well as a strong faith in his student’s abilities.

Instead of working with his mentor or devoting himself fully to his business with Handy, Pace instead chose a position as secretary-treasurer with Standard Life Insurance Company in Atlanta.<sup>28</sup> Once back in Atlanta, Pace became highly involved in the city’s black community. In 1916, following a decision by the Atlanta school board to eliminate the seventh grade in black schools in order to have more money

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<sup>25</sup> W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Harry Pace, April 3, 1912. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Although there is no exact date for Pace’s leaving of Memphis for Atlanta, W.C. Handy mentioned in his autobiography that Pace left for his new job shortly after founding Pace & Handy Music company. Going by Handy’s reckoning, the year would have either been late 1912 or early 1913. Judging by Handy, Pace did not seem too interested in music as a full time profession, preferring the relative security and lucrative nature of finance and insurance. Handy. *Father of the Blues*. 125.



for white schools, Pace was among other prominent Atlanta African-Americans who persuaded the board to drop the plan. Pace served as the first president of the city's NAACP chapter, with Walter White as its secretary.<sup>29</sup> It was in Atlanta in 1917 that Pace married Ethylnde Bibb, with whom he would later have two children. Also during his time in Atlanta, Pace kept up his correspondence with Dubois, seeking his mentor's aid in creating a cooperative store for employees of Standard Life.<sup>30</sup> Pace's interest in starting an employee store at Standard Life in Georgia ended when he moved to New York City in 1920. Pace relocated to be closer to Handy, whom he had sent a year prior to start recording in New York studios. Pace's role in the music business had become lucrative enough for him to pursue it full-time.<sup>31</sup> However, shortly after arriving in New York City in 1920, seemingly to dedicate himself fully to his work with Handy, Pace dissolved the partnership and began work on an individual enterprise, the Pace Phonograph Company.

In Pace's telling as to why he created the record company, he was upset by white record companies purchasing the rights to jazz and blues songs and then recording them with white artists. Pace writes that it was his job as president of Pace & Handy to "contact all phonograph companies so that our own numbers might be recorded from time to time. I ran up against a color line that was very severe....I

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<sup>29</sup> Walter White would later become the executive secretary for the national NAACP.

<sup>30</sup> Standard Life Insurance Company . Letter from Standard Life Insurance Company to W. E. B. Du Bois, February 27, 1918. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

<sup>31</sup> Pace was not far from his mentor in New York City. Indeed, a letter between the two concerning the NAACP's potential sponsorship of the Pan-African Congress notes both men now had addresses in New York City. Letter from Harry H. Pace to W.E.B. Du Bois, November 5, 1920. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

therefore determined to form my own company and make such recordings as I believed would sell.”<sup>32</sup> A 1919 advertisement for Pace & Handy Music Company supports Pace’s position that white record companies were hesitant to employ black musicians. The ad lists the phonographs available based on songs published by Pace & Handy. Of the nine records listed, only three were recorded by black artists: “Oh Death, Where is thy Sting” sung by Bert Williams for Columbia Records, as well as “St Louis Blues” and “Ole Miss Rag” by the New Orleans Jazz Band by Okeh Records.<sup>33</sup> Vaudevillian white artists such as Arthur Collins and Ernest Hare recorded the rest of the songs listed in the advertisement. In having his own record company, Pace wanted to demonstrate that African-Americans were capable of recording, producing, and financially supporting a record label without the involvement of white people.

Pace sought out Dubois’ advice in starting the recording company, and Dubois found the idea compelling. On December 22, 1920, Pace hoped to have an in-depth conversation with Dubois concerning his plans for a phonograph company.<sup>34</sup> Although Pace did not have a long talk with Dubois, it was long enough for Dubois to suggest the name “Black Swan” for the record label. Dubois chose the name to honor singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, who was known as the “black swan.” Even though Pace had begun the process of incorporation under the name “Pace

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<sup>32</sup> Roi Ottley and William Weatherby, *The Negro in New York*, (Doobs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1967). 232

<sup>33</sup> “Some wonderful records from the publications of The Pace & Handy Music Co., Inc.” New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division. <<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1232453>> Accessed 4/15/13.

<sup>34</sup> Presumably at an Elk meeting, of which the two men were life-long members.

Phonograph Corporation, Pace wrote to Dubois on December 27, 1920 that the name would not interfere with using “...the ‘Black Swan’ as a trade name and as a design and trade mark.”<sup>35</sup> Aside from giving Pace the name for the company, Dubois wanted to use his position with the NAACP, specifically at *The Crisis*, to drum up support for the record label. “I like your suggestion,” Pace wrote to Dubois, “of beginning in the February Crisis of a strong editorial on discrimination against colored voices and a subsequent article on ‘Black Swan’ records in the March issue.”<sup>36</sup> Pace clearly felt his mentor’s blessing for the product was vital, since he planned the release of the first slate of Black Swan records to coincide with the Crisis’ editorials. He informed Dubois: “I shall hope to have the first records ready for distribution around March 1<sup>st</sup> and this would fit excellently with that plan.”<sup>37</sup>

The Pace Phonograph Company was incorporated in the early part of 1921 with an initial capital stock of \$30,000. The original board of directors was comprised of W.E.B. Dubois; John E. Nail, a real estate agent who owned much of Harlem; Dr. Matthew V. Boutte, a physician; Viola Bibb, the wife of Joseph Bibb, a prominent minister in the African Methodist Episcopal church; and Pace himself.<sup>38</sup> Pace drew employees from Pace & Handy to make up the early staff of Black Swan Records, with a notable exception: Handy himself. Although the two men had a nine-year business relationship, Pace did not seek Handy’s inclusion as

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<sup>35</sup> Letter from Harry H. Pace to W.E.B. Du Bois, December 27, 1920. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>38</sup> Ottley and Weatherby, *The Negro in New York*, 233.

either business partner or artist for the record label. In Handy's telling, Pace "had disagreed with some of my business methods, but no harsh words were involved. He simply chose this time to sever connections with our firm in order that he might organize the Pace Phonograph Company....With Pace went a large number of our employees, persons especially trained for the requirements of our business and therefore hard to replace."<sup>39</sup> Such individuals included: William Still who became head arranger for Black Swan, and Fletcher Henderson, who was promoted to musical director for the new label. On the business side, Daniel Haynes became the company's secretary as well as notary public on the firm's trademark registrations.<sup>40</sup> The original office force also included A.H. Bibb (no relation to the Viola Bibb on the company's board of directors), a woman not previously affiliated with the Pace & Handy Music Company.<sup>41</sup> The label started out small, housed in the basement of Pace's house at 257 West 138<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>42</sup> There Pace began the process of inviting musicians and singers to record on the label, as well as locating suitable recording facilities.

Although Pace was able to secure recording studio space for Black Swan, finding a pressing facility to physically manufacture the records proved more difficult. Pace did not have the financial resources to purchase a pressing plant outright, and most companies who did own their own pressing facilities did not

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<sup>39</sup> Handy. *Father of the Blues*. 202.

<sup>40</sup> Davis and Loo, "Black Swan Records- 1921-1924". 2.

<sup>41</sup> Ottley and Weatherby *The Negro in New York*, 233.

<sup>42</sup> Arnold Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America: from the Spirituals, Minstrels, and Ragtime to Soul, Disco, and Hip-hop*. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986) 10

wish to lease out their equipment to a potential competitor.<sup>43</sup> Pace was finally able to strike a deal in Spring of 1921 with the Wisconsin Chair Co. of Port Washington, WI, which had recently expanded into New York for its own record labels: Paramount and Puritan.<sup>44</sup> In exchange for a copy of the recordings' masters, the Wisconsin Chair Co. was willing to press Black Swan Records at their plant in Minnesota. Although the distance between New York and Minnesota resulted in an extended delay between the recording and the release of the records, Pace was initially grateful for the deal and began to record the first slate of Black Swan Records.<sup>45</sup>

Black Swan Records released its first three records in May of 1921. The first was Revella Hughes' "At Dawning" with its B-side, "Thank God for a Garden." The record was described as "Soprano with violin, cello, piano."<sup>46</sup> The second was "For All Eternity" and "Dear Little Boy Of Mine" by Carroll Clark, a "Baritone, violin obligato."<sup>47</sup> The final record was a "Blues novelty, Soprano with orchestra" from Little Katie Crippen, "Blind Man Blues," and "Play 'Em For Mama."<sup>48</sup> This first slate of records was followed by five more, including another spiritual by Carroll Clark and dance records by Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor. *Black Swan*, 6.

<sup>44</sup> It was not unusual in the 1920s for furniture companies, who already built phonograph players, to produce and manufacture records for their players as well.

<sup>45</sup> Ottley and Weatherby. *The Negro in New York*, 233.

<sup>46</sup> *The Crisis*, May 1921, 44.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor. *Black Swan*. 23-24.

In the early summer of 1921, Pace found his biggest star with the discovery of Ethel Waters, a Blues singer originally from Chester, Pennsylvania, who sang in clubs around New York. Although accounts differed as to how Pace became familiar with Waters and asked her to record on the label, Waters' success on Black Swan was clear. Her first record, "Down Home Blues" and its B-Side "Oh Daddy," was incredibly profitable for Black Swan and Pace. Within six months of its release in July of 1921, Pace claimed he had sold 500,000 copies of the record.<sup>50</sup>

With the boon provided by Waters' success, Black Swan Records expanded as a company. In the summer of 1921, Pace moved it out of his basement and purchased a house solely as an office for the label on 2289 Seventh Ave. The top two floors of the three-story house were used as offices, with the bottom floor used as a shipping room.<sup>51</sup> In addition to new office space, new employees were hired for the expanding business, which grew to around thirty employees, ranging from shipping clerks and office staff to studio musicians and song demonstrators.<sup>52</sup> All of Black Swan's employees were black, in keeping with the racial goals of the label.

Bolstered by the success of Ethel Waters, and seeking more customers for Black Swan's records, Harry Pace approved a nationwide tour for the label's artists in the fall of 1921. Called "the Black Swan Troubadours," the tour contained singing, dancing, and comic skits. Ethel Waters headlined the tour, accompanied by an orchestra led by Fletcher Henderson. The tour lasted from October 1921 through

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<sup>50</sup> Ottley and Weatherby. *The Negro in New York*, 233.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 233.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 234.

July 1922 and was a big success for the company. Travelling through twenty-one states, Pace would later boast the tour “...advertised our records in every portion of the country as far west as Oklahoma and Texas.”<sup>53</sup>

At the end of 1921, financial records showed Black Swan Records had strong sales figures, totaling \$101,358.08 for the year.<sup>54</sup> In spite of the impressive number however, the cost of making records was high and coupled with Black Swan’s expenses, the record label only made a profit of \$10,856.78 in its first calendar year. Although the profits were utilized to repay stockholders and other start up costs, Pace was optimistic 1922 would bring about more sales for the company. With a solid star in Ethel Waters, and more regions of the nation becoming aware of Black Swan through the Troubadours’ tour, Pace continued the process of recording and advertising more records.

Although Black Swan was briskly selling records, Pace became increasingly frustrated in the delay of orders coming in from the pressing plant in Port Washington, Wisconsin.<sup>55</sup> Pace sought out facilities closer to the label’s offices in New York City, but was once again denied by the white-owned businesses. It is during this search that Pace became acquainted with John Fletcher, a white man who was a former executive from the Olympic Disc Record Corporation, a subsidiary of the Remington Phonograph Corporation.<sup>56</sup> When the Remington Phonograph

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 235.

<sup>54</sup> Pace Phonograph Corporation . Pace Phonograph Corporation financial statement, April 13, 1921. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>55</sup> Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor. *Black Swan*, 10.

Company went bankrupt in early 1922, Pace and Fletcher went into business together as the Fletcher Recording Company, Inc. and purchased Olympic's facility on Long Island, which included a recording studio and a pressing plant. The facility was capable of pressing 6,000 records a day, ideal for Black Swan's growing sales. The deal with Remington also included Olympic's trademark and masters of old recordings. With the deal cemented, Pace moved the entirety of Black Swan's office, shipping, and recording staff to the new facility on Long Island in May of 1922. Although an expensive expansion, Pace believed having all aspects of recording and manufacturing of Black Swan under one roof would streamline production and ultimately be a cost-efficient move for the company.<sup>57</sup> Although the Fletcher Recording Company technically owned the facility, Pace served as vice-president of the new company, and Black Swan was the only label that recorded and pressed records at the complex in Long Island.<sup>58</sup> In addition, Fletcher took no part in the recording or inception of Black Swan's records, only overseeing the records' manufacture, akin to the deal Pace previously held with the Wisconsin Chair Co.<sup>59</sup>

Although Pace hoped the purchase of a recording and pressing plant would stimulate continued growth for Black Swan, the later half of 1922 brought challenging times for the label. While designed as a cost-saving move for the future,

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<sup>56</sup> Davis and Loo "Black Swan Records". 5.

<sup>57</sup> Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor. *Black Swan*. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Davis and Loo "Black Swan Records" 6.

<sup>59</sup> Dubois viewed the move favorably, and asked Pace to provide photographs of the new factory for an upcoming issue of *The Crisis*. Pace Phonograph Corporation. Letter from Pace Phonograph Corporation to W. E. B. Du Bois, March 25, 1922. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.



the facility's purchase immediately put a strain on Black Swan's finances. As late as November of 1922, Pace was still trying to secure capital to pay off the purchase's bond.<sup>60</sup> In addition, the success of the Black Swan Troubadours tour brought Ethel Waters and Fletcher Henderson to the attention of white record labels. By mid-1922, Waters and Henderson ceased recording exclusively on Black Swan.<sup>61</sup> White record companies signing black musicians became more common in late 1922, with companies such as Columbia, Brunswick, and Victor releasing their first blues and jazz records by black artists. By the beginning of 1923, the number of blues artists recording on white labels outnumbered those signed to Black Swan almost four to one, whereas they had been roughly equal six months prior.<sup>62</sup>

Faced with rising expenses and an increasingly crowded market, in the fall of 1922, Pace began rereleasing songs originally recorded on Olympic Records, of which the Fletcher Recording Company owned the masters. However, in order to sustain Black Swan's persona of only issuing records by black musicians, many of the original artists' names were changed in order to give the appearance of being black. Pace was no stranger to the practice, since November of 1921 occasionally issuing records of masters of white artists leased from other record companies under black names.<sup>63</sup> In addition, Pace had previously recorded white artists record

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<sup>60</sup> Pace Phonograph Corporation. Letter from Pace Phonograph Corporation to W. E. B. Du Bois, November 9, 1922. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

<sup>61</sup> Henderson kept his position as musical director for the label. Davis and Loo "Black Swan Records" 6.

<sup>62</sup> Suisman. "Co-Workers in the Kingdom of Culture". 1322.

under an assumed black voice and issued the record under a black pseudonym, such as the case with soprano Aileen Stanley recording as the black alto 'Mamie Jones.' But the scale in which Pace rereleased Olympic's back catalog under false names had not previously been done. In time, a sizable percentage of Black Swan's musical offerings were actually rereleases of records recorded by white musicians under a black alias.<sup>64</sup>

The practice, although seemingly in defiance of the label's stated goals, initially aided the company. By early 1923, Black Swan was selling around 7,000 records a day.<sup>65</sup> However, the three presses at the Long Island factory were only capable of manufacturing 6,000 records per day. Fearing the lag in production would cause orders to be cancelled, Pace expanded the business even further by ordering three additional custom made record presses. Although expensive, Pace believed the machines, installed in January of 1923, would pay for themselves with the increase in production.<sup>66</sup>

Unfortunately for Pace, the company's expansion coincided with a disastrous time for the record industry as a whole. The introduction of radio, although still in

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<sup>63</sup> David Suisman, "Black Swan Rising." *Humanities*, November/December 2010 | Volume 31, Number 6. Accessed from <http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2010/novemberdecember/feature/black-swan-rising>.

<sup>64</sup> In his "Black Swan Rising", David Suisman estimates one third of the entirety of Black Swan's catalog to be rereleased of records recorded by white artists. However, in *Black Swan: the Record Label of the Harlem Renaissance*, the writers estimate this number to be closer to one fifth. Regardless in the difference in percentage, both are in agreement the practice did not become common until the late fall of 1922 and lasted until the label's end.

<sup>65</sup> Ottley and Weatherby *The Negro in New York*, 234.

<sup>66</sup> As with the facility's initial purchase, Dubois sought photographs of the new pressing machines in order to provide good publicity for the company in *The Crisis*. Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Harry H. Pace, January 20, 1923. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

its infant stages, was beginning to overtake phonographs in popularity. The expansion of radio caused sales of records to plummet industry-wide: Pace would later remark Black Swan went from selling 7,000 records a day in early 1923 to, in the spring of the same year, selling “...only about 3,000 records daily and then it came down to 1,000, and our factory was closed for two weeks at a time.”<sup>67</sup> With the expansion of the factory coming shortly before a dramatic decrease in sales, Black Swan was irreversibly in dire financial straits. In a circular letter dated July 25, 1923, Pace detailed the increasingly ominous outlook for Black Swan records including the attempts of other labels to steal its artists, the drop in sales, and its mounting debts. Pace was not entirely despondent, however, believing that sales would increase once the summer ended.<sup>68</sup>

Despite Pace’s optimism, such a reversal in fortune never came. Black Swan Records ceased releasing records and advertising in July of 1923. It officially went bankrupt in December of 1923, with its Long Island factory sold at a sheriff’s sale to a Chicago firm that made records for Sears & Roebuck.<sup>69</sup> Pace was able to lease Black Swan’s catalog to Paramount Records in May of 1924, although the deal was never very profitable for either party.<sup>70</sup> Despite taking a job as president of the Northeastern Life Insurance Company, Pace kept Black Swan in business with

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<sup>67</sup> Ottley and Weatherby. *The Negro in New York*, 234.

<sup>68</sup> Circular letter from Pace Phonograph Corporation to W. E. B. Du Bois, July 25, 1923. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>69</sup> Ottley and Weatherby *The Negro in New York*, 234-235.

<sup>70</sup> Pace had initially wanted to sell the entirety of Black Swan’s catalog to Paramount, but had to agree to a lease instead since Paramount lacked capital due to the downturn the record industry as a whole due to radio’s introduction. Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor. *Black Swan*. 12.

regular meetings of its board of directors through the summer of 1926.<sup>71</sup> Pace maintained control over the firm's masters, and hoped there would eventually be a revival of the business, but such a revival never came.<sup>72</sup>

Black Swan was Pace's final foray into the world of music. Pace stayed as president of the Northeastern Life until 1930, when he moved to Chicago to attend law school. Following his graduation from law school in 1933, Pace established the firm of Bibb, Tyree, and Pace in Chicago. There, he seemed rather content until 1942, when black employees accused him of trying to pass as white, which took a psychological toll on Pace. He died a year later in 1943.

As Black Swan Records ceased publishing, the post-war boom of the 1920s was still in full swing, and the Harlem Renaissance was beginning to enter its peak. Artists such as Langston Hughes and others would come to exemplify the well-educated, cosmopolitan Negro that Black Swan sought to promote through its records. However, this success would end with the coming of the Great Depression. The economic boom times of the post-World War era were gone, replaced by an overwhelming economic downturn. Black industry was damaged by the scale of the Depression, causing a decrease in black entrepreneurialism that would last for through the late 1940s.<sup>73</sup> Black banks were hit especially hard, of the 134 formed

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<sup>71</sup> Letter from Black Swan Phonograph Company to W. E. B. Du Bois, May 20, 1926. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>72</sup> Pace gives no exact date as to the final cessation of Black Swan Records, stating the company finally ended when its property on Seventh Avenue was foreclosed on and the company's charter was foreclosed. However, the scholarship is in agreement Pace was completely out of any sort of music business by 1930. Ottley and Weatherby *The Negro in New York*, 235.

between 1888-1934, only 12 were still operating in 1938.<sup>74</sup> Aside from the loss of money for its members, it also removed much of the black capital necessary for the financing of African-American entrepreneurial actions. The banks that did survive the Depression were typically larger, white, and not as willing to lend black persons money.

The music business had similarly changed. The introduction of radio had driven most of the smaller labels out of business. Those that did survive the Depression and the introduction of the radio were, without exception large and had the capacity to sign and pay artists displaced from the loss of smaller labels like Black Swan. Black musicians were still recording during the 1930s and seemed to be doing quite well. Indeed, some of the biggest names in jazz, such as Louis Armstrong, did not become major names until the 1930s. However, these artists recorded for white labels and music performed by black artist returned to the old model of low culture race records. No company took up the mantle of Black Swan in order to bring opera arias sung by black singers to black consumers. The black music-listening public decided they wanted jazz and blues, and the white record labels were happy to provide such records. Throughout the Depression and World War II, little could be found in the way of black-owned entertainment enterprises. While persons certainly sought to escape the hardship of the Depression through the vicarious and relatively cheap release of movies, music, and other forms of pop culture, the companies producing such were large and well-financed. There were no

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<sup>73</sup> Manning Marable. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society*, (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1983) 148.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

black-owned entertainment companies with national distribution formed during the Depression. This would continue to be the case until after the Second World War.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DECISIONS OF HARRY PACE

The May issue of *The Crisis* contained advertisements announcing the formation of Black Swan Records. The issue contained two full-paged ads for Black Swan. The first led with the headline: “Buy New Black Swan Records Every Month and Encourage Negro Singers, Musicians and Composers,” before listing the aims of the company.<sup>1</sup> The ad mentions the sort of music to be recorded on Black Swan, “**We will record** popular songs of the day, dance melodies, blues, high class ballads, sacred songs, Spirituals and operatic selections just as the other phonograph companies do.”<sup>2</sup> The advertisement also stated the company will aid the black race in spite of discrimination by white labels, “**We will give** opportunities to our own singers such as they can get from no other companies. Every record you buy means encouragement to some Negro singer and some Negro musician to continue their work and develop their talent.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, this benefit would not be contained to solely the artists since, “**Every record you buy** means employment along new lines to a large number of our talented people, in addition to clerks, stenographers and others.”<sup>4</sup> The advertisement closes with “**Buy BLACK SWAN RECORDS** and you will help preserve the best voices of the race, besides getting music which the race wants but other companies do not record,” before stating in bold: “**BLACK SWAN**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Crisis*, May 1921, 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

**RECORDS are the only records using exclusively Negro voices and Negro Musicians.”<sup>5</sup>**

Black Swan Records produced records in many genres, but it highlighted its opera, spiritual, and classical offerings as high-culture records that exemplified Black Swan’s supreme cultural aspirations. As demonstrated through their advertisements, Black Swan claimed their black singers and instrumentalists were the peer of any white performers. In addition, Black Swan sought to demonstrate how black consumers, who made up the label’s clientele, were capable of purchasing and enjoying such genres, in defiance of mainstream depictions of African-Americans that held otherwise. This reflects a conflict within the black community during this time regarding the proper role of African-Americans in American culture, and how middle and upper class persons sought to distinguish themselves from the lower class. However, this conflict was virtually ignored by a white mainstream consumer culture that viewed the black race as a whole, not making distinctions of class.

Through Black Swan Records, Harry Pace believed the growing educated, urban, black middle class could demonstrate their worth to white America by showing their appreciation for certain genres of art and entertainment, particularly music. Pace’s opening announcement of the founding of Black Swan in the *Chicago Defender* was similarly demonstrative of these ideals. The advertisement identified Black Swan as the “Only company using Racial Artists in recording high class song

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



records. This company made the only Grand Opera records ever made by Negroes.”<sup>6</sup> The stated purpose of Black Swan was to demonstrate that black persons were not only capable of creating high culture, such as spirituals and opera arias, but they had the purchasing power to keep the company profitable by producing such records. Pace reiterates this financial angle in the *Chicago Defender* announcement: “[Black Swan is the] Only bonafide Racial company making talking machine records. All stockholders are colored, all artists are colored, all employees are colored.”<sup>7</sup> Although genres such as blues and jazz would be included on the Black Swan repertoire of releases, they were not highlighted in these initial advertisements, which appealed to a more cosmopolitan and refined taste.

Pace’s belief in the need to rectify the negative stereotypes of African Americans perpetuated by the white mainstream was similarly held by his mentor Dubois. In particular, W.E.B. Dubois used his position as editor of *The Crisis* to elaborate on his feelings on the necessity of Black Swan Records, as well as build up an association between the phrase ‘black swan’ with racial pride and talent. In a series of editorials in *The Crisis* penned in order to lead up to announcement of Black Swan Records, Dubois made a case against white record labels discriminating against black artists. “We have good authority,” he wrote in the February 1921 issue, “for stating that 65% of the phonograph records made for the Southern trade by a well-known company are sold to colored people. Nevertheless, this company only employs one colored artist regularly and only occasionally a colored orchestra or

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America: from the Spirituals, Minstrels, and Ragtime to Soul, Disco, and Hip-hop*. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986). 102

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

quartet.”<sup>8</sup> He continues his complaint against this unnamed company, “All these musicians are confined strictly to a certain class of music and on no account are they allowed to attempt anything else, no matter what their gifts or abilities” fitting into the idea black artists were capable of high art, but were squelched by white oppression.<sup>9</sup> Dubois highlighted Roland Hayes as the particular target of this sort of discrimination. Although Roland was classically trained and found acclaim in Europe as an opera singer, white record labels refused to hire him unless he agreed to sing “comic darky songs.”<sup>10</sup> This angered Dubois since white men with inferior voices and training to Hayes were allowed to sing all genres of music, including ridiculing Negro folk music. Dubois became impassioned as he neared the end of his editorial: “Under such discrimination there is but one solution. We have already throughout the land developed a Negro audience to appreciate and pay a dozen or so Negro artists....We must now develop a business organization to preserve and record our best voices...to reveal the best music not only of their own race but of all races and ages.”<sup>11</sup> Almost as an afterthought, Dubois closed with a brief sentence stating such a record label was being formed. Dubois neglected to mention his intimate knowledge of the company’s founding, as well as his being a major element in its inception. Instead, Dubois wrote as an outside observer, frustrated by the injustice towards black artists and hoping for the situation to be rectified, but overlooked any indication he was part of solution that he suggested.

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<sup>8</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, “Opinion of W.E.B. Dubois,” *The Crisis*, February 1921, 152.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

The following issues of *The Crisis* in the spring of 1921 kept readers aware of the new record label, as well as the phrase 'black swan.' The March issue contained an article detailing the life of singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, who was known as the 'Black Swan.' The article highlighted Greenfield's classical training and musical skill, but noted she was held back because of her race. Were it not for this discrimination, the article held, she easily would have been heralded as one of the greatest singers of her generation.<sup>12</sup> Once again, seemingly as an afterthought, the article mentions Pace's upcoming record label, noting it would be called "Black Swan Records."<sup>13</sup> The April issue of *The Crisis* kept up the trend of keeping the phrase 'black swan' linked to beauty and racial pride, this time with a fairy tale of the same name. In the tale, which takes place in Russia, the titular Black Swan is a beautiful young woman who has the magical ability to transform into a black swan. Although mulatto and capable of passing for other races, racial pride prohibited her from doing so.<sup>14</sup> The May issue of *The Crisis* was the most saturated with the phrase 'black swan,' and touted the involvement of people of color in high culture music. The cover of the issue is a picture of Chevalier de Saint-Georges, an eighteenth-century violin virtuoso and conductor of African ancestry. The issue also contains a short biography of de Saint-George, highlighting his success in Europe despite being the Caribbean-born son of a black slave and a French planter.<sup>15</sup> The conclusion of the 'Black Swan' fairy tale follows the article on Saint-George, wherein the heroine is

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<sup>12</sup> "The Black Swan", *The Crisis*, March 1921, 213.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Maria Moravsky "The Black Swan" *The Crisis*, April 1921, 259.

<sup>15</sup> Jessie Fauset, "Saint-George, Chevalier of France", *The Crisis*, May 1921, 10.

praised for her beauty and skill as a singer, before transforming into a swan and flying away.<sup>16</sup>

Judging by the effort Dubois put into ensuring material in *The Crisis* would correspond with the initial slate of Black Swan Records, as well as having a vested interest in the company, it is clear Dubois agreed with Pace on the necessity for the company. Like Pace, Dubois believed African Americans were capable of high-culture work, but were being squelched by white record labels, and other cultural distributors and promoters, who desired stereotypical offerings. By changing the depiction of blackness from negative to one of talent and racial pride, both Pace and Dubois believed a greater acceptance of black singers and artists could occur, ultimately leading into their inclusion into American mainstream culture. Black Swan would aid in the advancement of the Negro race through culturally edifying music. In addition to providing cultural benefits, the financial success of the record label would provide employment and improvement for not just musicians, but office staff and sales persons as well. In all, the benefits of Black Swan were to be manifold, and Dubois supported Pace whole-heartedly in his endeavor.

Pace and Dubois were not alone in this belief among the black community. The idea of uplift bringing about the acceptance among the white mainstream for the entirety of African-Americans through individual cultural achievement was prevalent in the 1920s. Music was seen as a particularly potent means through which black advancement could be achieved, but only through certain genres. Although jazz might have been popular, many black intellectuals viewed it as

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<sup>16</sup> Maria Moravsky "The Black Swan" *The Crisis*, May 1921, 17.

detrimental to the race. Instead, they argued genres that appealed to refined and educated persons should be highlighted in the African American community in order to bring about the elevation of the race. A 1927 editorial in *The Louisiana Weekly*, a New Orleans-based black newspaper, verbalized this ideal, “The love for music is universal. Music is fascinating [sic] even to Pagans. We need more music in our homes, not jazz and nonsense, not music of the kind that violates good taste and roughens the feelings; but music sacred and divine, pure and cultured, pleasing to people of education and refinement.”<sup>17</sup> Although there was division on what genres fit these criteria, there was consensus that the black spiritual had exceptional artistic merit and could be utilized to lead to the widespread acceptance of African-Americans.<sup>18</sup> However, the spiritual would have to transition from folk art to high culture through a refining process, which would ultimately result in the inclusion of black persons as accepted and equal members of American society.

Dave Peyton, a musician and performer in Chicago, embodied this belief in the transformative power of music, assuming it was within certain genres. His column “The Music Bunch,” which ran in *The Chicago Defender* from 1925 to 1929, was primarily for the working musicians of Chicago, informing them of gig openings to be had in the city’s restaurants and clubs. Peyton also used the column expound upon his beliefs about proper musical genres. In his May 8, 1926 column, entitled “The Influence of Music,” Peyton detailed which genres of music he deemed

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<sup>17</sup> *Louisiana Weekly*, August 6, 1927. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Dubois in particular believed black spirituals were the genre best capable of conveying the black experience. The final chapter in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk* is devoted the genre and its merits.

beneficial and enriching, namely “national music,” “folklore music,” and “spirituals.” He believed these genres “carries with it a spirit to fascinate, to invigorate, to make one happy.”<sup>19</sup> Peyton’s praise for these genres was matched by his distain for jazz, which he labeled, “crude, barbaric, vulgar, suggestive...” and found it “degrading, appealing only to the animal emotions of the dancers who are susceptible to its charms.”<sup>20</sup> Although Peyton recognized many classically-trained musicians took Jazz gigs out of necessity, he believed the genre was a fad, and encouraged musicians to keep up their studies in anticipation that more acceptable genres will come back into fashion.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike Peyton, J.A. Roberts believed jazz music had staying power, but the genre needed to be refined in order for it to reach its utmost potential. In his essay “Jazz at Home,” published in 1925, Roberts celebrated Jazz’s Negro origins, as well as ranking it “with the movie and the dollar as a foremost exponent of modern Americanism.”<sup>22</sup> Although Roberts recognized jazz’s origins, he found white organizations, such the bands of Paul Whiteman and Vincent Lopez, were “...demonstrating the finer possibilities of jazz music.”<sup>23</sup> Roberts believed jazz could

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<sup>19</sup> Dave Peyton. “The Musical Bunch: The Influence of Music,” *The Chicago Defender* (National edition), May 8, 1926, 6. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Chicago Defender* (1910-1975). <accessed 5/7/14>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Dave Peyton. “The Musical Bunch: The Harlem Symphony Orchestra, The Race’s Pride,” *The Chicago Defender* (National edition), November 21, 1925, 6. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Chicago Defender* (1910-1975). <accessed 5/7/14>.

<sup>22</sup> J.A. Roberts. “Jazz at Home” *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. (New York: Touchstone, 1999) 216.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

aid in removing artificialness in American society, but only if its practitioners, both black and white, elevated it from its lower class origins into “nobler channels.”<sup>24</sup>

In all, the prevailing consensus among black intellectuals and musicians of the 1920s was that music was a powerful tool which could demonstrate the advancement of the growing educated, urban, black middle class to white society. Good musicianship could be the vehicle through which a new depiction of African Americans could be presented, one of racial pride, achievement, and intellect. Even though they recognized the popularity of Jazz and race records, these individuals believed the race as a whole would be best served through an appreciation and support of acceptable music.

This distinguishing of African-Americans by class was not found in the majority of race records, which were put out by white record companies in the 1920s. Black musicians who were signed to white labels primarily put out records that reinforced a monolithic depiction of African-Americans as primarily rural and Southern, as well as lower-class. These record companies made no concessions to an educated black audience, instead portraying African-Americans in stock racial stereotypes. Although these records were not deemed socially edifying by black commentators of the 1920s, the records were the most popular, and became the prevalent depiction of music performed by black artists in American society. On the occasions where an African-American achieved acclaim for a high culture genre, such as Roland Hayes’ skill as an operatic tenor, as mentioned by Dubois in his editorial in *The Crisis*, white American record labels were only interested in their

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

performing songs reinforcing these stereotypes. Furthermore, these companies did not view their race records as an avenue through which African Americans could earn respectability from the larger mainstream culture. White record labels were not concerned with racial uplift, instead they focused solely on making profitable records based upon the consuming public's tastes.

Harry Pace was also interested in making profitable records, but unlike the white record labels, he additionally desired to sound to action racial uplift and eventual equality through his records. In particular, he sought to cultivate an association between Black Swan and a portrayal of African Americans that equated blackness with beauty, esteem, and the capacity for high class. This portrayal was most strongly demonstrated in the advertisements for Black Swan Records that appeared in the black press.<sup>25</sup> Through the advertisements, Pace depicted Black Swan Records as a force for positive change in the African-American community, as well as a legitimately black company.

The racial element of Black Swan's advertisements was much more pronounced than Pace's earlier ads for the Pace & Music Company. In particular, unlike Black Swan, Pace & Handy did not advertise primarily to an African-American audience. As such, the advertisements did not flaunt the racial merits of the songs, but rather their popularity. Because of this focus on popularity, the ads concentrated on Pace & Handy's most successful offerings, namely the Blues. For instance, an advertisement from 1918 touts, "our popular music can be heard in every show

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<sup>25</sup> The bulk of Black Swan's advertisements appeared in one of three titles: *The Chicago Defender*, *The Crisis*, and *The New York Age*. Each one of these institutions fit into Pace's perception of black respectability since they catered to an urban, educated, and upwardly mobile audience.



place on Broadway, and our BLUES are being sung and played the world over.”<sup>26</sup> In addition, the same advertisement claimed “Ringtail Blues” to be “the most popular BLUES in Harlem.”<sup>27</sup> Unlike the later Black Swan ads, these advertisements made no effort to assure the reader of the company’s black legitimacy, or how purchasing its sheet music would benefit the race. Instead, the ads noted stated Pace & Handy was “the Leading Colored Publisher” and affirmed “**THEY ARE A CREDIT TO THEIR RACE.**”<sup>28</sup> Although the Pace & Handy Music Company was comprised mainly of African-Americans, their blackness was not a selling point for the company, except to promote a degree of authenticity for the music, and therefore not highlighted in the advertisements. Likewise, although the company sought to be as financially prosperous as possible, the advertisements did not link the success of Pace & Handy with the wider advancement of African Americans.

The advertisements for Black Swan Records fell into two basic templates. One template was descriptive, a catalog listing of its newest releases. The first ad of this nature appeared in the May 1921 issue of *The Crisis*, where the label announced its first three offerings. The artist and songs’ titles were mentioned, as well as a brief description of the record. The advertisement also named the price for each record (one dollar), as well as an address to contact if their local dealer did not supply Black Swan Records. Although short and informative in nature, it still iterated the

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<sup>26</sup> “Beautiful Music for the Home from the Leading Colored Publishers; The Pace & Handy Music Co., Inc.” New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division. <<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1232458>> Accessed 4/15/14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

company's emphasis on genuine blackness. For instance, the May 1921 ad in *The Crisis* declared in bold that Black Swan records were, "**THE ONLY RECORDS USING EXCLUSIVELY NEGRO VOICES and MUSICIANS.**"<sup>29</sup> This style of ad was regularly utilized throughout Black Swan's existence, listing the newest releases of the month as well as reminding readers of Black Swan's genuine blackness.

The second template was editorial and took the form of an opinion piece, which was more vocal in its racial views and desire for black elevation. These editorials, typically credited to Pace, expounded upon issues affecting the black community, and how valuable Black Swan Records were to sustaining positive advancements for African-Americans. A prime example of this sort of ad appeared in the December 1921 issue of *The Crisis*. It begins "**Every School Child** should be able to hear our own high class colored singers and musicians on the Phonograph," before launching into a explanation of Black Swan's applicableness for education.<sup>30</sup> This ad was also forward in assuring the reader in Black Swan's quality and legitimacy as a black company, "Every BLACK SWAN RECORD is a *Good* Record and is made by colored people. BLACK SWAN RECORDS are the only records made by Colored People, and is not a Jim Crow annex to a white concern."<sup>31</sup> The ad ends by listing some of the artists signed to Black Swan, such as Ethel Waters, to demonstrate the amount of black talent available through the label. Pace also utilized this style of advertisement to challenge the veracity of the reader's racial

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *The Crisis*, December 1921, 92.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

convictions. The advertisement from the July 1923 issue of *The Crisis* demonstrates this principle. In it, Pace asked the reader, “**Do You Belong to That Class of Men** Who feel it their duty to support every worth while race enterprise and who spare no efforts in furthering their progress, **Or to That Class** who say in public that it is the duty of every Negro to lend his support and, in private, patronize the other race in preference to their own regardless of the merit of the colored man’s product?”<sup>32</sup> It closes by informing the public that “**Real Race People** Are buying Black Swan Records for they have found them superior to the records made by the white companies.”<sup>33</sup> While Pace recognized that most record dealers did not believe there to be a demand for classical artists among the black record-buying public, other ads urged consumers to defy this expectation. An ad from the January 1923 issue of *The Crisis* pressed readers: “Go to your Record Dealer and ask for the Better Class of Records by Colored Artists. If there is a Demand he will keep Them.”<sup>34</sup> Although this style of advertisement was not utilized as frequently as the catalog of new releases, it was still used regularly during the label’s lifetime. Through these ads, Pace linked Black Swan Records with racial advancement, as well as insinuating that not purchasing records from the company was akin to not being genuinely supportive of the race.

As time went on, Pace began to utilize the editorial advertisement template for another purpose. With the early success of Black Swan records, more white

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<sup>32</sup> *The Crisis*, July 1923, 140.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *The Crisis*, January 1923, 137.

labels began releasing records from black artists in attempt to tap into the colored market. Facing a loss in market share, Black Swan's advertisements began not only to tout the merits of the record company for African-American progress, but also to discredit other record companies for their attempts for "passing for colored." An ad appearing in the December 1922 issue of *The Crisis* informed the reader of the popularity of catering to black buyers by white record labels, before listing what are deemed a few egregious examples. It ends, "Don't be deceived. We repeat: the only genuine colored record is BLACK SWAN."<sup>35</sup> Although Pace recognized more black musicians were being employed and recording records through the expansion of white record labels, he believed the abundance of African-American musicians alone would not cause racial uplift and equality for the entire black community. Rather, black musicians were part of a larger equation. A black musician creating a record alone would not have nearly the positive impact for the race as a whole unless it was produced by a record company that had black owners, manufactured using black labor, and sold using black sales agents. This link between economic success and racial promotion was seen throughout Pace's career, and was most keenly felt at Black Swan.

Pace's belief in the ability of black economic success to bring about racial advancement was also held by his mentor Dubois, who was particularly enamored of creating a black economy separate from the mainstream American economy in order to circumvent the financial discrimination and poverty prevalent among African-Americans. Dubois gave a practical demonstration of this principle in a 1912

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<sup>35</sup> *The Crisis*, December 1922, 91.

article on the black population of Durham, North Carolina. In the article, Dubois details how the African-Americans of Durham were able to overcome bias through the development of a "group economy," which he defined as "...the closed circle of social intercourse, teaching and preaching, buying and selling, employing and hiring, and even manufacturing, which, because it is confined chiefly to Negroes, escapes the notice of the white world."<sup>36</sup> Although Dubois recognized the black population of Durham did not live in a utopia, he found their financial independence led to better race relations with Durham's white residents, who "encouraged the best type of black man by active aid and passive tolerance."<sup>37</sup> Dubois found having black versions of businesses would lead to black independence and better race relations for the nation as a whole. In addition, during the late 1910's/early 1920's, Dubois was a proponent for collectivism. After Pace wrote Dubois in 1918 asking for advice in starting a collective store for employees of Standard Life, Dubois sought his former student's aid to hold a conference on cooperation in order to explain its benefits to the black community.<sup>38</sup> Like Pace, Dubois believed individual economic gains for black entrepreneurs were not truly beneficial to the race as a whole unless their financial success was shared with the black community. Although Dubois never directly commented on Black Swan's advertisements during his

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<sup>36</sup> W.E.B. Dubois. "The Upbuilding of Black Durham. The Success of the Negroes and their Value to a Tolerant and Helpful Southern City" *W. E. B. Du Bois: Selections from His Writings*. Courier Corporation, 2013, 133.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid* 137.

<sup>38</sup> W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois. 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Harry H. Pace, March 6, 1918. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

correspondence with Pace, Dubois was willing to have the label run ads in *The Crisis* without initial payment.<sup>39</sup>

Marcus Garvey also advocated a message of racial pride and economic unity in the 1920s. Garvey, an immigrant to the United States from Jamaica, came to embody Pan-Africanism and Black Nationalism in the early twentieth century. Like Pace and Dubois, Garvey believed African-American racial uplift was a collective concern and could be achieved through a link between economic independence and more positive cultural portrayals. Akin to Pace's admonishing black readers to support Black Swan Records in order to benefit all African-Americans, Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association's advertisements likewise beckoned their readers to support their race by patronizing black-owned industries. In addition, Garvey's ads linked the financial success of these companies with racial respectability as a whole: "If you expect the race to be respected generally...then you must support the enterprises we have already started."<sup>40</sup> Although the two men would later become bitterly opposed to each other's philosophy, initially Garvey agreed with Pace's beliefs about music and invited him to give a lecture on the subject at Garvey's New York Liberty Hall in early 1922.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Black Swan (Sound recording label). Letter from Black Swan Phonograph Company to W. E. B. Du Bois, December 26, 1924. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>40</sup> "Negro World Advertisement" Robert A. Hill. *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers: 1 September 1921-2 September 1922*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985) 756.

<sup>41</sup> Ted Vincent "The Social Context of Black Swan Records". *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, Steven Tracy ed. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) 376.

The advertisements for race records put out by white record companies were not by and large culturally edifying to the black race, but rather detrimental to racial equality. These advertisements did not challenge the black readers to purchase records in order to aid in the race's cultural uplift. Instead, they reinforced the low culture depictions Pace sought to challenge through *Black Swan*. An example of this sort of ad appeared in the June 24, 1922, issue of *Chicago Defender*. Okeh records announced the release of the "Lonesome Momma Blues" with a caricature of 'Momma' who fit the Mammy stereotype, complete with handkerchief wrapped around her head and prominent large lips. The ad's writing is equally stereotypical: "You'll almost get up and shout when you hear that talking, wailing, moaning saxophone. Oh boy! [It] is the best toe-tickler since "Muscle Shoal Blues."<sup>42</sup> The ad concluded with a listing of Okeh's newest race records, all of which were within the Blues genre. Okeh was not alone in this sort of advertising. An advertisement from Ajax Records from the October 27, 1924 issue of the *Defender*, contains much of the same stereotyping. Advertising the "Crap Shooting Blues," the illustration is a large drawing of a dice game between two black male stock-caricatures being broken up by the police. In addition, the ad lists the newest Jazz and Blues releases, before proclaiming Ajax to be: "***The Quality Race Record.***"<sup>43</sup> Even though the *Chicago Defender* was based in a Northern city and its readership was primarily comprised of educated middle and upper-class African-Americans, the white record labels' advertisements did not reflect this demographic. Instead, the ads depicted a

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<sup>42</sup> *Chicago Defender*, June 24 1922, 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Chicago Defender*, October 27 1924, 6.

monolithic black race that was rural and lower-class in its composition, keeping with the stereotypes of the old South. Unlike Black Swan ads, which appealed to the reader's racial pride and desire for upward mobility, the advertisements put out by white companies portrayed African-Americans as changing little since the time of slavery. They did not acknowledge advancements made by the race in education and class. Although the ads were ostensibly made for an African-American audience, this sort of depiction reaffirmed old stereotypes about blackness.

Akin to Pace's belief in the capacity of certain genres to best elevate the black race to respectability, he likewise sought the same level of decorum from the musicians and artists signed to Black Swan. Pace expected his performers to adhere to respectable behavior and professionalism in their musicianship. Despite the musician's talent or their potential popularity, Pace would not work with a musician on Black Swan if they did not fit into this expectation. A prime example of Pace's convictions was his refusal to sign Bessie Smith. In 1921, Smith made her first demonstration recording for Pace at Black Swan's studio. Despite her talent, Pace did not feel the grittiness of her singing would fit into the refined image he was hoping to cultivate for Black Swan. In addition, her coarse behavior during the recording session repulsed Pace, and he refused to sign Smith.<sup>44</sup> Bessie Smith would go on to sign a contract with Columbia in February of 1923, and her first record for them, "Downhearted Blues," sold over 780,000 copies.<sup>45</sup> In addition, she would

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<sup>44</sup> There is no consensus on the exact nature of Smith's offense. But it is most commonly told that Smith interrupted her recording session with "Hold on, boys. Let me spit," before proceeding to do so in the studio. Michelle R. Scott. *Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga: Bessie Smith and the Emerging Urban South*, (Champlain, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998) 132.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 132.



become one of the most popular recording artists of the 1920s, known as the 'Empress of Blues.' Although Pace had the chance to sign Smith before Columbia or any of the other record labels, he did not do so due to his personal convictions and what he deemed appropriate behavior for black musicians. This sort of refusal to work with musicians Pace judged to lack a sufficient work ethic was also present during his time managing W.C. Handy. In 1918, Pace urged Handy to fire his touring band in Memphis since they were more interested in drinking and carousing on Beale Street than relocating to New York City.<sup>46</sup> Even though Handy had toured with the musicians for several years, Handy followed Pace's direction.

Pace believed an educated and musically literate performer would best represent the company, as well as the larger goal of racial uplift. Indeed, Pace brought William Grant Still and Fletcher Henderson, the two musicians who had the most influence on Black Swan's artistic direction, over to Black Swan from the Pace & Handy Music Company because of their musical background. These two musicians best represent Pace's goals with Black Swan: although capable of playing popular genres such as the Blues and Jazz, they were classically trained and accomplished enough to perform elite classical music as well as to any white musician.

Originally from Woodville, Mississippi, William Still studied composition at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio. Although service in World War I interrupted his studies, and Still never received a degree from the institution, his interest in classical music and composition continued throughout his career. After arranging for W.C. Handy's band for several years, Still was hired as head arranger

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<sup>46</sup> W.C. Handy and Arna Bontemps. *Father of the Blues*, (New York: Macmillan, 1941). 176-177.

for the Pace & Handy Music Company. Still took the same position when Pace opened Black Swan in 1920. During his time in New York working for Black Swan, Still continued his studies in symphonic music composition, learning under George Whitefield Chadwick, head of the New England Conservatory of Music, as well as the French Modernist Edgard Varese.<sup>47</sup> In addition to composing and arranging music, Still was skilled as an instrumentalist, particularly on the violin, cello, and oboe. At Black Swan, Still was primarily responsible for the arranging and orchestration of the music to be performed. Although he did not record for the company as often as Fletcher Henderson, Still's skill set as an instrumentalist was occasionally utilized.<sup>48</sup>

While Still did most of the label's orchestration, it was Fletcher Henderson who performed most often on Black Swan's records. Henderson was born to educated middle-class parents in Cuthbert, Georgia. Like Pace, Henderson was an alum of Atlanta University, where he graduated in 1920 with a degree in mathematics and chemistry. Although skilled as a pianist, Henderson initially moved to New York City to begin post-graduate work at Columbia University, as well as work as a chemist. However, upon finding his race barred him from most jobs in the chemistry field, Henderson found employment at the Pace & Handy music company as a song plugger, promoting the company's music outside of its offices.<sup>49</sup> Shortly

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<sup>47</sup> "William Grant Still" The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture, <<http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=1775>>. Accessed 4/19/14.

<sup>48</sup> For instance, Florence Cole-Talbert's "The Bell Song," from the opera *Lakmé*, includes Still on oboe as part of its orchestration. Florence Cole-Talbert, "The Bell Song", *Lakmé*, Black Swan 7103. <[http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/teaching/2004\\_03/sources.html](http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/teaching/2004_03/sources.html)> Accessed 3/1/14.

<sup>49</sup> Jeffery Magee. *The Uncrowned King of Swing : Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12

thereafter, Henderson also became a pianist and song demonstrator for the company, working in-house. When Pace left the Pace & Handy Music Company to start Black Swan, Henderson followed Pace and was promoted to musical director for the new label. As musical director and bandleader, Henderson appeared in the bulk of Black Swan's records as a pianist, either in the solo piano backing a singer or as part of a larger group of background instrumentalists. As the label went on, Henderson became better known as an artist in his own right, eventually issuing records on the label beginning in the Spring of 1922, as the leader of Henderson's Dance Orchestra.<sup>50</sup> Henderson also led the orchestra that accompanied Ethel Waters and the Black Swan Troubadours during their tour. Although Henderson was primarily a musician for Black Swan, he occasionally arranged music for the label. On the instances when Henderson composed, it was mainly in the Swing, Blues, and Jazz genres.

The music recorded by Black Swan also fit into Pace's expectation of respectability. The label's forays into Opera, Classical pieces, Spirituals, and other genres deemed 'high-class' were highlighted most often in Black Swan's advertisements, and heralded as equivalent to any record made by white artists. Similarly, although Black Swan recorded genres such as Jazz, Blues, and dance numbers because they were popular and in demand, Pace sought to keep good musicianship and refinement in the label's artists regardless of the type of music

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<sup>50</sup> Henderson's first record on the label was "Fancies" with its B-side "My Oriental Rose" (Black Swan 2022 Helge Thygesen, , Mark Berresford, and Russ Shor. *Black Swan: the Record Label of the Harlem Renaissance: A History and Catalogue Listing including Olympic Records and Associated Labels*. (Nottingham: VJM Publications, 1996) 31.

played. As such, the Jazz numbers recorded by Black Swan tended to be more subdued and less “hot” than was prevalent by artists on white record labels. Black Swan’s popular music records or standards, Jazz, and Blues records were highly orchestrated, contained an even tempo throughout, had limited changes in sound dynamics, and contained no improvisation. These records generally utilized the same set of minimal instrumentation: limited percussion and bass, with mostly trumpets, trombones, clarinets, as well as Henderson on the piano making up the orchestration. The opera and spiritual recordings have more dynamic arrangements, utilizing more instruments and more complex instrumentation, presumably in an attempt to demonstrate the musicians’ ability and training to play such numbers. This insistence on intricacy was part of Pace’s larger mission to demonstrate the equivalency of black musicians to their white counterparts. A Black Swan record, regardless of genre, was to be a high-quality recording and Pace sought to insure this by making sure the orchestrations reflected the sophistication of both the music being played and the musicians performing.

Pace was not alone among members of the Black community during the 1920s in desiring training and refinement from black musicians and the music they played. In “Jazz at Home,” J.A. Roberts argued that jazz music had the capacity to serve as a critique against the ennui of modernity, provided it was performed with training and discipline. Although Roberts acknowledged the genre’s origins among lower-class black people, he held it would only reach its potential if it were refined by the music of the upper classes, as well as white people. Roberts did not mention Black Swan or Harry Pace by name as purveyors of this proper sort of music, but

Roberts did praise some artists signed by the label as exceptional. He listed Ethel Waters among, other jazz musicians he deemed worthy, as an “inimitable artist, with an inventive, improvising skill that defies imitation.”<sup>51</sup> Roberts also commended Fletcher Henderson, citing Henderson’s jazz music as containing “none of the vulgarities and cruelties of the lowly origin or the only too prevalent cheap imitations.”<sup>52</sup> Roberts did not believe jazz music to be a fad, but unless its energies and creativity was not diverted into the proper channels, it would not reach its potential and therefore not assist in the elevation of African-Americans, as well as aid in removing artificiality in American society.<sup>53</sup>

Dave Peyton did not have such a positive view of jazz music, and in his “The Musical Bunch” articles in the *Chicago Defender*, he lamented the genre’s popularity, as well as the lower class type of musician who became associated with jazz. In his July 16, 1927, column, entitled “What Jazz has Done,” Peyton listed his grievances against the genre. Although he acknowledged many musicians had made good money playing jazz music, it came at the sacrifice of their artistic merit. Peyton claimed jazz forced otherwise properly trained musicians to use incorrect fingerings, which over time would lead to losing the “methodical way of execution.”<sup>54</sup> Because of their now missing ability to play standard music, these

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<sup>51</sup> J.A. Roberts. “Jazz at Home” *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. (New York: Touchstone, 1999) 221.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 221.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

<sup>54</sup> Dave Peyton. “The Musical Bunch: What Jazz has Done”, *The Chicago Defender* (National edition), July 16, 1927, 6. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975). <accessed 5/7/14>.

musicians would be unable to get jobs once what Peyton deemed as “real music” was once again in demand. Peyton also believed jazz pandered to the baser emotions of its listeners and would ultimately lead to “shame and destruction.”<sup>55</sup> He held that jazz should “...be eliminated from the public dance halls and should be disqualified by the decent element.”<sup>56</sup> If jazz absolutely had to be performed, Peyton urged his musician readers to follow his example with his own orchestras, playing the genre only if requested by a patron and rendering it “short and sweet.”<sup>57</sup> Although Peyton did not mention Black Swan as an example of the proper sort of jazz, it is clear his preference to keep jazz music as quiet and professional as possible, is akin to the subdued orchestrations on the label’s jazz records.

In order to combat the musical degradation brought about by jazz, Peyton admonished his readers to practice their instruments and seek proper training. In addition, he advised musicians to arrive punctually for engagements and behave with decorum while playing for an audience. Peyton had a dim view of performers who violated contracts and went against the musicians’ union and advised musicians to stay with their bands and not seek individual gigs. He also scolded musicians who plagiarized, and warned the practice would result in showing one’s self as lacking in creativity. Above all, Peyton asked his musician readers to act professionally. Peyton considered music a serious business, and pressed his readers

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

to do so in kind. By acting in a professional manner, Peyton believed black musicians could "...demand the respect musicians of other races do."<sup>58</sup>

One musician who Peyton believed embodied these ideals was Fletcher Henderson. When an exclusive white hotel employed Henderson's orchestra for a series of performances in Chicago in the summer of 1927, Peyton praised the achievement, lauding the orchestra members as "perfect gentlemen, and they established the reputation all over the country."<sup>59</sup> Peyton also urged his readers to follow their example, believing Chicago-based black musicians could find similar success in the city if they behaved in a manner akin to Henderson and his orchestra. Peyton also praised William Grant Still, calling the composer, "one of the most efficient musicians in the country."<sup>60</sup> In particular, Peyton held Still's work as a positive example of the best attributes of African-Americans: "not the care-free type, but the serious, thinking ones who seek to solve their problems and do solve them ultimately through the means of fervent prayer."<sup>61</sup>

Although these black thinkers recognized the popularity of 'hot' jazz and other more rambunctious genres of music, they believed black musicians would best serve the race by not emulating the lifestyle suggested by the styles' rowdiness and

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<sup>58</sup> Dave Peyton, "The Musical Bunch: Things in General", *The Chicago Defender* (National edition), April 7, 1928, 6. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975). <accessed 5/7/14>.

<sup>59</sup> Dave Peyton, "The Musical Bunch: Things in General", *The Chicago Defender* (National edition), August 6, 1927, 5. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975). <accessed 5/7/14>.

<sup>60</sup> Dave Peyton, "The Musical Bunch: Things in General", *The Chicago Defender* (National edition), November 13, 1926, 6. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975). <accessed 5/7/14>.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

carefree attitude. Behaving in such a way would reinforce negative stereotypes of black persons, and could undermine advancements toward equality made by other African-Americans. By acting in a higher-class manner and mimicking the professionalism and musicianship of artists such as Henderson and Still, it was believed black performers could not only aid in the uplift of the race, but also insure personal financial security. Although Peyton and Roberts disagreed on the long-term viability of Jazz music, both were in agreement the future would inevitably require musicians to have musical literacy and training in order to have sustained employment.

Meanwhile, white record companies of the 1920s did not emphasize the musicianship of their black artists, nor did they purposefully seek to hire accomplished black musicians to play on their race records. In addition, they had little qualms about recording music that could be conceived as detrimental to black advancement. While Black Swan sought to provide racial uplift with its records, white labels did not make this sort of consideration. As such, these record labels focused on race records, which were typically lower class in their content and did not provide much in the way of what black thinkers considered uplift for the race, but were popular and profitable.

Much like his choice of Still and Henderson to serve as the chief musicians of the company, Harry Pace comprised his board of directors to fit into his vision of African-American respectability. The initial board of directors, comprised of: Pace, Dubois, relator John E. Nail; physician Dr. Matthew V. Boutte, and minister's wife Viola Bibb, embodied the sort of educated and upper-class lifestyle Pace was seeking



to market in Black Swan Records. While some might doubt the viability of Black Swan's goal of selling high-class records to a black audience, the composition of the company's board of directors could be seen as proof of the existence of such a set of cosmopolitan individuals. This desire to seek out prosperous and prestigious individuals was reflected in later members of the company's board. By 1923, the board included the additions of Dr. Godfrey Nurse, a Guyanese-born surgeon who would later become the first black elector in the electoral college; Dr. W. H. Willis, who served as head of Washington D.C.'s medical association; and Truman K. Gibson, an insurance and banking executive.<sup>62</sup> Although none of the members of Black Swan's board of directors had experience or knowledge of the music business, save Pace himself, each of the members had found success and respectability through black businesses and within the African-American community. Pace assembled a board that represented an educated and affluent black upper class with designs of respectability and inclusion with the majority white American culture.

Pace's rationale in choosing his board reflected the aspirations of Dubois and the NAACP. In particular, the board members are examples of the "Talented Tenth," the small educated section of African-Americans whom Dubois believed was necessary to serve as exemplars for the bulk of the black population. Dubois sought these upper-class black persons to serve as "leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people."<sup>63</sup> Although seeking vocational education was

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<sup>62</sup> Ted Vincent, "The Social Context of Black Swan Records". *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, Steven C. Tracy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) 370.

<sup>63</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, "The Talented Tenth", *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day*, 1903. <<http://www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1148.htm>> accessed 3/14/14.

commendable, Dubois believed such a concentration would be in vain were it not coupled with opportunities for higher advancement. Dubois' belief was also reflected in the composition of the NAACP, which tended to be educated, middle-class, and with designs of upward social mobility. In addition, the NAACP and Dubois tried to utilize their respectability to demonstrate to white society why they should be included as equal members of the American population.

Marcus Garvey did not hold the members of Black Swan's board and the sort of elite African-Americans they represented in high esteem. For Garvey, this kind of black individual was not commendable, but rather detrimental to the race. He found all too often their wealth came from the fleecing of poorer black persons, or from racial accommodation.<sup>64</sup> Garvey had a similarly dim view of the NAACP, finding the organization too elitist and calling it "The National Association for the Advancement of Certain People."

The behavior of white record companies who produced black genres during the 1920s does not reflect the debate within the black community. Aside from Black Swan, no other record label had black board members. In addition, white record labels did not seek to appeal to a black audience by pointing out black executives or employees working for the label aside from the artists themselves. White labels did not feel a responsibility to make designations of class through their race records, but rather produced the records they felt were most marketable to African-American consumers.

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<sup>64</sup> Vincent, "The Social Context of Black Swan Records", 376.

Black Swan's cultural aspirations were coupled with the necessities of running a business. Unlike the Pace & Handy Music Company, Black Swan was to be racially self-sufficient and not depend upon white customers for its financial viability. In order to continue to make a profit, Pace would make decisions that seemingly ran contrary to the company's racial goals. These decisions would put Pace at odds with not only his white competitors, but also black persons, primarily Marcus Garvey, who held different views. This confrontation reflected the larger debate within the black community on whether African-Americans should seek separation or assimilation within American society.

The genres recorded by Black Swan changed according to market trends and the popularity of certain artists. From the company's initial releases in May of 1921 to June of 1922, Black Swan released 64 records. Of the 64, 25 were of high-class genres, such as operatic arias and spirituals; 9 were Blues records, including those of Ethel Waters; and 30 were lower-class records, including dance numbers, novelty songs, and jazz.<sup>65</sup> During the six month period following the end of Ethel Waters and Black Swan Troubadours' tour in July 1922 to December of 1922, Black Swan released 34 records: 16 high-class; 13 Blues; and 15 lower-class.<sup>66</sup> The year of 1923 saw 72 records released on Black Swan: 7 high-class; 34 Blues; and 31 lower-class.<sup>67</sup> Black Swan declared bankruptcy in December of 1923, and ceased putting out new records.

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<sup>65</sup> Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor. *Black Swan* 23-41.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 42-47, 58-68.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*. 48-57, 69-83.

Pace increased the production of jazz and dance records when they proved the most popular, despite the genre's depiction as lower class by many African-American elites, and being viewed as detrimental to the race through the reinforcement of negative stereotypes. Likewise, since high-class genres did not prove as popular with consumers, the number of these records produced by Black Swan decreased. These trends ran contrary to the stated goals of Black Swan, which was touted as a higher-class enterprise that would aid in the elevation of the black race. Even though the Jazz and popular numbers released on Black Swan were overly-orchestrated in order to best demonstrate the skill and training of its musicians, if Pace had serious moral and social qualms with the genre, he would not have included them among his record company's releases. However, since Jazz and dance records were more popular with his black audience, and record sales were needed to keep the company in business, Pace kept making more records in these popular genres, even though they were not his ideal vehicle for racial uplift.

In his correspondence with Pace, Dubois did not mention this change in the type of records being released by Black Swan, let alone criticize the decision, despite Dubois belief in the importance of Negro spirituals. However, Dubois did attempt to persuade artists who were more respectable to sign with Black Swan, including internationally acclaimed black tenor Roland Hayes.<sup>68</sup> In addition, Dubois routinely mentioned the record company in his speeches, linking the achievements of the

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<sup>68</sup> W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Roland Hayes, May 27, 1921. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

enterprise with a positive perception of African-Americans.<sup>69</sup> Dubois did not harp upon the type of music being produced in these speeches, but rather focused on the importance of the company's success.

Like Dubois, other sources of the time stayed silent about Black Swan's shift towards lower-class genres. Most mentions of Black Swan Records in the black media tended to focus more on the company's existence, and its solely black personnel, and less on the sort of music it produced. When Black Swan began to reduce the number of higher-class records it released, there were no editorials lamenting the reduction in the amount of operatic arias by African-American singers. Instead, like Dubois, most observers focused more on Black Swan's being, rather than its adherence to its initial goals of racial uplift through proper genres.

Black Swan was not the only company to increase the recording of jazz, dance, and Blues genres. White companies, who saw the Black Swan's early success, began to produce more records by black artists. In addition, musicians previously signed to Black Swan were lured to white labels by better-paying contracts. While white record companies increased the number of Jazz and Blues records, they did not emulate Black Swan in hiring black musicians to perform higher-class genres, such as spirituals or arias. Black Swan proved black consumers were willing to purchase certain types of records, and white record companies moved to supply music by black artists for this growing demographic.

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<sup>69</sup> David L. Lewis. *W. E. B. Du Bois, 1919-1963: The Fight for Equality and the American Century*, (London, UK. Macmillian, 2000.) 113.

Despite his racial motivations for starting the label, Pace was willing to utilize the abilities of white individuals for the advantage of Black Swan. The white person with the most direct involvement in the company's development was John Fletcher, the former executive of Olympic Records with whom Pace entered into a partnership to form the Fletcher Recording Company. Fletcher Recording Company technically owned the recording and pressing factory on Long Island, although Black Swan was the only label producing records at the site. In addition, Fletcher appeared to have no direct impact on the recording of Black Swan's records, but only their manufacture. Despite Fletcher's lack of influence on the sort of records Black Swan created, however, his business relationship with Pace was ostensibly contrary to the company's claim of "All stockholders are colored, all artists are colored, all employees are colored."<sup>70</sup>

As with Pace's decision to increase the number of lower-class genres of music being released, while decreasing higher-class genres, there was little in the way of condemnation of Pace's partnership with Fletcher. In his private correspondence with Pace, Dubois did not voice disapproval of Pace's relationship with Fletcher, but rather asked for a photograph of the new factory to run in *The Crisis* in order to generate publicity for the company.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, Dubois was willing to work under white superiors at the NAACP in order to achieve racial goals for African-Americans. Like many other African-Americans of the 1920s, Dubois and Pace recognized that

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<sup>70</sup> Arnold Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America: from the Spirituals, Minstrels, and Ragtime to Soul, Disco, and Hip-hop*. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986) 102

<sup>71</sup> W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Harry H. Pace, January 31, 1923. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

affiliating with white people was a necessity at times in order to best serve the interests of black people. Although seemingly opposite to Pace's goal of an entirely black record label, the partnership with Fletcher was justified in order to secure the Long Island factory, which in turn would lead to the production of more Black Swan records. Likewise, although Garvey had a low opinion of Pace and his ownership of Black Swan records, Garvey did not criticize Pace for his partnership with Fletcher. Indeed, Pace's purchasing of a pressing factory by a defunct white company was akin to Garvey's purchasing ships formerly used by white companies for his shipping company, The Black Star Line. In addition, Garvey utilized relationships with like-minded white groups (even the Ku Klux Klan) in order to advance his message of racial separatism.

As a white music executive willing to work with a black company during the 1920s, Fletcher appeared to be a rarity. There is no evidence of any other white record company or executive seeking financial arrangements with a black company or individual akin to the partnership between Fletcher and Pace. Although white companies began to hire black musicians and increased their recording of genres popular among black consumers as the decade progressed, they did so without seeking African-Americans to fill roles in the management or leadership of the labels. For most white record labels, partnering with a black individual in order to lend credibility to their releases was an action deemed unnecessary for profitability.

Pace's utilization of white individuals for Black Swan was not limited to his partnership with John Fletcher. More contrary to the stated goals of the label than a partnership with a white-owned company, Pace released records originally

recorded by white artists under black pseudonyms. Despite extolling Black Swan's mission to "search for and [develop] the best singers and musicians among the 12 million (black Americans)," the label issued records by white artists.<sup>72</sup> This practice was in effect as early as November 1921, but did not become common practice until after the purchase of Olympic in the fall of 1922.<sup>73</sup> Reissuing Olympic's back catalog on new discs under pseudonyms was a cost saving measure for the company. Since Pace already owned the master recordings, no new music had to be recorded, and the company could save on costs, which was welcome because of its expansion. By changing the name of the artist to one that gave the appearance of being African-American, Pace could claim adherence to the company's mission to record only black talent.

Despite going against the stated aims of the company, Pace's decision to release records by white artists under black pseudonyms went unnoticed by his contemporaries during the life of Black Swan Records. Knowledge of Black Swan's practice was not common during the 1920s, and there was no reaction from Dubois, Garvey, or any of the other black intellectuals of the time. In addition, black artists signed to Black Swan were similarly in the dark regarding the release of these records. Even Fletcher Henderson, who held a high position within the company, was unaware of the practice. Regardless, Pace's decision violated the spirit of racial uplift that he claimed as the basis of Black Swan. Although Pace was willing to

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<sup>72</sup> Vincent. "Social Context of Black Swan Records". 367.

<sup>73</sup> David Suisman, "Black Swan Rising." *Humanities*, November/December 2010 | Volume 31, Number 6. Accessed from <http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2010/novemberdecember/feature/black-swan-rising>.



sacrifice the company's cultural integrity into order to ensure the company's continued economic sustainability, it ultimately failed to keep the label in business.

Pace's releasing of white records under black names was isolated during the 1920s. There is no evidence that other record labels engaged in the practice during the period. White record labels had no designs on racial uplift, and therefore did not need to participate in such an endeavor. These labels issued records by black and white artists, in a variety of genres, and did not have the same cultural restrictions Pace imposed on his company. Although Black Swan could claim to be the outlet for authentic black expression, the white record companies were better equipped to ship records with black artists to black listeners, and do so more inexpensively.

Although Pace had similar economic goals to Marcus Garvey- they both championed black entrepreneurialism and economic growth within the African-American community- there was contention between the two men. In January of 1923, Pace was part of a group of eight black business people who composed a letter to the Attorney-General of the United States pleading for action, ideally deportation, to be taken against Marcus Garvey, who they deemed dangerous for the advancement of blacks in America. The letter labeled Garvey as one who hoped to generate open racial conflict and sought to profit from "the gathering storm of race prejudice and sense the imminent menace of this insidious movement, which cancerlike, is gnawing at the very vitals of peace and safety -- of civic harmony and interracial concord."<sup>74</sup> Pace, and the other signers of the letter, believed racial

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<sup>74</sup>Harry Pace et al. Writing to the U.S. Attorney-General -- "Garvey Must Go". Accessed from [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/garvey/filmmore/ps\\_go.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/garvey/filmmore/ps_go.html).

harmony was not only possible, but was being impeded by Garvey and his followers. The signers of the letter included: Pace; John E. Nail, real-estate agent who owned much of Harlem, and was also on Black Swan's board; Robert S. Abbott, publisher of the *Chicago Defender*, in which Black Swan regularly advertised; Julia P. Coleman, president of Hair-Vim chemical company, which specialized in black hair care products; William Pickens, field secretary for the NAACP; Chandler Owen, co-publisher of *The Messenger*, a literary magazine where Black Swan had advertisements; Robert W. Bagnall, director of several branches of the NAACP; and George Harris, an alderman for New York City and editor of the *New York News*, another newspaper in which Black Swan advertised.<sup>75</sup> The signers of the petition against Garvey were much like the original board of Black Swan in that they represented a new, educated, and affluent black upper class who could best assimilate into the white majority society. Although they represented a spectrum of black achievement and affluence, they were united in their disdain for Garvey and the sort of race rousing he embodied.

In response to the letter, Garvey lashed out against the signers of the letter, calling them "wicked Negroes" and accusing them of hating their own race.<sup>76</sup> Garvey also singled out the individual signers of the letter, labeling Pace, "a business exploiter who endeavors to appeal to the patriotism of the race by selling us commodities at a higher rate than are charged in the ordinary and opening

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Marcus Garvey. *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey, Or, Africa for the Africans, Volume 1.* (New York, NY: The Majority Press, 1923) 300.

markets.”<sup>77</sup> He held a similarly dim view of John E. Nail, who Garvey held as “a real estate shark who delights, under the guise of race patriotism, to raise the rent of poor colored people even beyond that of white landlords.”<sup>78</sup> Even Julia P. Coleman was called “a hair straightener and face bleacher, whose loyalty to the race is to get the race to be dissatisfied with itself.”<sup>79</sup> Although Garvey did not deny these individuals had found financial success, he believed this success came at the exploitation of poorer black people, as well as the detriment of the race as a whole. In addition, Garvey accused all the signers of being “nearly all Octoroons and Quadroons” and, with one exception, of having “married to Octoroons.”<sup>80</sup> Because of their mixed race heritage, Garvey believed the signers and their ilk hated their blackness and yearned to lose their black identity and become “the lowest whites by assimilation and miscegenation.”<sup>81</sup> Garvey urged African-Americans not to follow the model set by this sort of mixed race person, believing it would only lead to continued exploitation and derogation by white America, since they did not have the best interest of the race at heart.<sup>82</sup>

Harry Pace and Marcus Garvey sought to utilize black industry for two very different purposes. For Pace, it was to be the vehicle by which black people could

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 307.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 307.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 307.

<sup>80</sup> The exception was Chandler Owen, who had at one time almost married a white woman, but according to Garvey, was prevented from doing so by the criticism of the UNIA. *Ibid*, 308.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 311.

<sup>82</sup> Garvey’s disdain also extended to Dubois, who he labeled, “a monstrosity” due to Dubois’ mixed racial heritage, and accused Dubois of hating “the black blood in his veins.” *Ibid*, 310-311.

prove their worth and ultimately be accepted into American society as whole. For Black Swan Records, Pace wanted the artistic merit and commercial success of the label to lead to the inclusion of black artists and executives into acceptability by the upper classes. Meanwhile, Garvey supported black businesses insofar as they would help black people become completely self-reliant and eventually lead to total separation between the races. Garvey did not support a future of black people within America, but rather believed American society was too corrupt and racially biased to offer anything to black persons, who would be best served by leaving the United States entirely. Garvey sought unity for the black race, believing the “Negro race should be encouraged to get together and form themselves into a healthy whole, rather than seeking to lose their identities through miscegenation and social intercourse with the white race.”<sup>83</sup> The ultimate goal of their enterprise, inclusion for Pace and separation for Garvey, was the fundamental difference between the two men, and demonstrates why they were so vehemently opposed to one another.

Although Pace formed other companies during his career, Black Swan was his most ambitious in terms of linking together economic and cultural aspirations. Unlike his forays into insurance and other businesses, Black Swan was purposefully designed to demonstrate that African-Americans were capable of creating high culture, such as spirituals and opera arias, in addition to having the purchasing power to sustain the company to produce more cultured records. In balancing desires for the record company to provide racial uplift with the realities of keeping a

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<sup>83</sup> Marcus Garvey. “Aims and Objects of Movement for Solution of Negro Problem”, 1924, <<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/segregation/text1/marcusgarvey.pdf>> Accessed 3/14/14.

company financially in business, Harry Pace exemplified some of the debate in the 1920s among African Americans about their role in the American society. The tension between black economic self-sufficiency versus integration into the larger economy played out in Black Swan's short life, as well as the cultural issue of maintaining an authentically black company while not falling into stereotypical depictions of race. While Pace hoped Black Swan would ultimately bring about respectability for African-Americans as a whole, the respectability Pace sought differed from his contemporaries of the 1920s. Likewise, in eschewing selling to the white mainstream, Pace hampered Black Swan's economic prospects and ultimately caused the label's demise. Subsequent record label owners would not mimic Pace's mistake. Instead of selling an image of black respectability to solely black audience, future African-American music entrepreneurs found that the white mainstream was willing to buy depictions of black culture, and decided to supply this desire.

### CHAPTER THREE: BERRY GORDY'S MOTOWN: 1959-1988

With the crippling economic realities of the Depression, many Americans sought out movies, music, and other forms of entertainment as a distraction or therapeutic release during the Depression. While movie theaters experienced a drop in attendance at the onset of the Depression, dropping from averaging 90 million customers a week in 1930 to just 60 million two years later, by 1935 attendance had risen to 80 million.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, technological advancements caused the price of a radio to drop to an average of \$10 by the early thirties.<sup>2</sup> This fall in price made the radio more available to lower and working class individuals. As a result, radios became commonplace in homes of all Americans. The soaring popularity of the radio was disastrous for many record companies, like Harry Pace's Black Swan Records, and they were forced to shut down. Because of the economic downturn and the attractiveness of radios, record sales dropped dramatically during the Great Depression. In the mid-1920s, American record labels sold around 100 million copies a year, but in the early years of the Depression, the number fell to 6 million.<sup>3</sup> Still, some record labels were able to adapt to the changing environment and utilize the radio as an avenue to promote their artists. Among the artists who became popular during the Depression were black musicians, who became quite successful in a time otherwise limited economically. Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Butsch, "American Movie Audiences of the 1930s". *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 59 (2001), 108.

<sup>2</sup> B. Eric Rhoads. *A Pictorial History of Radio's First 75 Years*. (West Palm Beach: Streamline Publishing, Inc., 1996) 24.

<sup>3</sup> "The Great Depression" excerpted from "Jazz: A History of America's Music"  
[http://www.pbs.org/jazz/time/time\\_depression.htm](http://www.pbs.org/jazz/time/time_depression.htm).

Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, Cab Calloway, and Fats Waller were among the number who initially gained their national notoriety during the Depression. However, these artists were recording for white record labels, and their success did not benefit the larger black community. Although their music was popular with black audiences, their success primarily benefited only the artists themselves and the white record labels.

Another realm where African-Americans were gaining national notoriety during this era was through sports. Like other forms of entertainment, sports grew in popularity during the period, bolstered by new technology and increased interest as a diversion from the Depression. Particularly popular during the 1930s was boxing, in large part because of how well the sport lent itself to radio broadcast. One of the most celebrated boxers of the era was Joe Louis, who became the World Heavyweight Champion of boxing in 1937 and held on to the title through 1949. Louis' fame made him an idol for many in the black community and a role model for others to emulate.

Part of Louis' popularity within the black community was that his background was prototypical to many African-Americans during the period. Louis was born in Alabama in 1914 to sharecroppers, but moved to Detroit in 1926 when his family sought better economic opportunities. Louis struggled through school, but was very adept as a pugilist.<sup>4</sup> Louis turned pro in 1935 and began his rise up the heavyweight ranks. His sole loss prior to winning the championship belt was in 1936 to German boxer Max Schmeling by a knock out in the 12<sup>th</sup> round. Louis won

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<sup>4</sup> Louis was functionally illiterate for most of his adult life.

the championship belt from James J. Braddock the next year. The high point of Louis' career was his rematch against Schmeling in 1938. The match, which had political and cultural dimensions because of the looming war with Germany, as well as racial tensions within the United States, was heavily promoted and a source of great national interest. Louis won the match two minutes and four seconds into the first round. He would continue to box until his retirement in 1949, with a professional record of 66-3, 52 of those wins by knock out.

Louis became a major sports figure and a source of pride in the African-American community. Inside the ring, Louis was literally beating his opponents and demonstrating how a black man could best a white. Author Langston Hughes was a fan of Louis and described how his fights were perceived amongst African-Americans:

“Each time Joe Louis won a fight in those depression years, even before he became champion, thousands of black Americans on relief or W.P.A., and poor, would throng out into the streets all across the land to march and cheer and yell and cry because of Joe’s one-man triumphs. No one else in the United States has ever had such an effect on Negro emotions – or on mine. I marched and cheered and yelled and cried, too.”<sup>5</sup>

Louis was especially popular in his adopted hometown of Detroit, where the boxer was celebrated and heralded by the large migrant black population. Louis'

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<sup>5</sup> Langston Hughes. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, Volume 14, Autobiography: “I Wonder As I Wander.” Edited with an Introduction by Joseph McLaren. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001) 307.



popularity caused others to pursue boxing, including a young man from Detroit named Berry Gordy.

Like Louis, Gordy shared a transient background akin to many of Detroit's black residents. Gordy was the son of Berry Gordy, Sr. and Bertha Gordy, who moved to Detroit from Sandersville, Georgia in 1922. The elder Gordy was relatively successful in Georgia as a land-owning farmer. However, when his wealth attracted unwanted attention from the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, Gordy Sr. moved to Detroit to provide what he believed would be a safer environment for his children.<sup>6</sup> Unlike most of the migrants to Detroit during the Great Migration, Gordy Sr. did not work for the auto companies and had a decent amount of money to his name, thanks to the sale of his Georgia farm. Upon arriving in the city, Gordy Sr. catered to the city's growing black population, preferring to remain economically autonomous from the auto companies. Although he engaged in many enterprises, two of his most successful businesses were as a plasterer and a grocer. Gordy Sr. learned the trade of plastering within a few years of arriving in Detroit and pushed his sons to follow suit in the trade.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Gordy Sr. established the Booker T. Washington grocery store in Detroit, another enterprise which his children were pressured to be involved. Although staunchly middle class, the Gordy's idealized the virtues of manual labor espoused by Booker T. Washington.<sup>8</sup> They hoped to instill a strong work ethic and willingness to work unglamorous jobs in their eight children.

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<sup>6</sup> Nelson George *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise & Fall of the Motown Sound*, (London: Omnibus, 1986) 5.

<sup>7</sup>Peter Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. (New York: Grove Press, 1979) 5.

<sup>8</sup>George *Where Did Our Love Go?* 11.

Born in 1929, after the family was firmly established in Detroit, Berry Gordy Jr. resisted the virtues his father hoped to instill. A poor student, Gordy similarly had a poor work ethic in the family's other businesses. Gordy's father attempted to set him up as a plasterer, but Gordy worked sporadically and never took too much interest in his job.<sup>9</sup> What did grab Gordy's attention was boxing and Joe Louis' success. Gordy showed devotion to his time in the boxing gym and believed himself capable of becoming as accomplished an athlete as Louis. As an amateur in Detroit, Gordy became friends with another boxer named Jackie Wilson. The two became friends despite differences in personality: Wilson was charismatic and loud, in contrast to the more reserved Gordy, who was so convinced of his abilities, that he dropped out of school in the eleventh grade to pursue boxing full-time.<sup>10</sup>

Gordy's career as a boxer was respectable, but ultimately short lived and not as lucrative as he hoped. As a 128-pound featherweight, Gordy fought primarily in Detroit, but also traveled around the country in order to compete. The highpoint of Gordy's boxing career, at least on a personal level, was on Friday, November 19, 1948, where Gordy appeared on the same card as his idol. At Detroit's Olympia Stadium, Gordy won his match against Ciro Montalzo via decision, before watching Louis beat Vern Mitchell in the main event.<sup>11</sup> Gordy's boxing career lasted until 1950 and he retired with a final record of 12-3-2, with 5 wins via knock out.<sup>12</sup> As a boxer of middling success, Gordy did not find the same wealth and accolades as Louis.

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.* 12.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson would never go professional, since he had a dismal record as an amateur boxer.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Bak. *Joe Louis: The Great Black Hope*. (Boston, MA: De Capo Press, 1998) 175.

<sup>12</sup> Berry Gordy Fight Record, [http://boxrec.com/list\\_bouts.php?human\\_id=199464&cat=boxer](http://boxrec.com/list_bouts.php?human_id=199464&cat=boxer)

Although Gordy's stint as a boxer was officially ended by the army drafting him in 1950, it was evident his skills as a pugilist would not be financially sustainable.

Gordy's army service in Korea, like his time as a boxer, was similarly unspectacular. Gordy had no great love for the military and served without distinction. Despite serving in an integrated unit overseas, Gordy saw no real combat and volunteered to serve as chaplain's assistant in order to be taken as far away as he could from the front.<sup>13</sup> A Motown executive would later remark on Gordy's service, "he wasn't a great military leader or shoot-em-up type, had no real ken for Army life, and did as little as he could."<sup>14</sup> After his term was up, Gordy was discharged in 1953 and returned to Detroit.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after his release from the army, Gordy married his first wife, Thelma Coleman; their first child, Hazel Joy, followed in 1954. That same year, Gordy took his army savings and discharge pay, coupled with \$700 borrowed from his family, and started a record store, the 3-D Record Mart.<sup>16</sup> The store specialized in jazz music, which was Gordy's favorite genre. Gordy had high hopes for the enterprise, but it was ultimately short-lived. The 3-D Record Mart closed within a year. The store was unsuccessful because of changes in musical tastes, with jazz music becoming less popular with the younger black population leading to a smaller customer base of jazz fans.

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<sup>13</sup> Berry Gordy. *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown*. (Collingdale, PA: Diane Publishing Company, 1994) 58.

<sup>14</sup> Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> The nature of Gordy's discharge is unclear. Although he served the standard two-year term, Raymona Gordy Singleton (Gordy's second wife) would later claim he received a Section 8 discharge and insinuates Gordy acted either mentally ill or homosexual in order to qualify. Gordy never refuted his ex-wife's claims, but never presented his actual discharge in his defense.

<sup>16</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 16.

The closing of the 3-D Record Mart put Gordy in a tremendous financial bind. Faced with mounting debts from the store's failure, Gordy also had a growing family. Gordy's second and third child, Berry Gordy VI and Terry James, were born in 1955 and 1956, respectively. In addition, the couple had marital problems. Gordy and Thelma fought often and were functionally separated after 1954, despite reconciliations that lasted long enough for the conception of another child.<sup>17</sup> Faced with such pressure, Gordy felt like he had little choice but to take a job in the industry from which his family had prided itself on remaining independent: the automobile industry. In 1955, Gordy began work on the Lincoln-Mercury assembly line. Although the assembly line was consistent work, the amount of money Gordy made was not particularly good. Gordy earned \$79.88 a week from his factory job, but his family's weekly expenses were around \$97.65.<sup>18</sup> Gordy was unable to make progress in paying off his debts from the failure of the 3-D Record Mart and his psyche suffered; he found the line monotonous and soul-crushing and slipped into a depressed state. In order to pass the time, Gordy began composing pop songs in his head.<sup>19</sup> Although not musically literate and having little idea of musical theory, Gordy's self-taught method was effective and had the potential to become lucrative. Although still working the line, he became obsessed with the idea of becoming a songwriter.

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<sup>17</sup> The couple would ultimately divorce in 1959.

<sup>18</sup> Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, Suzanne. *Dancing in the Streets: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) 14.

Like he would regularly do during his life, Gordy drew upon his family connections in order to pursue his goal of becoming a successful songwriter. In the mid-1950s, Anna and Gwen Gordy, two of Gordy's sisters, operated a cigarette stand at the Flame Show Bar, a Detroit nightclub popular with black audiences.<sup>20</sup> Gordy began to attend nightly in an attempt to hustle his songs to the artists who performed at the club. Gordy hoped to attract the attention of some of the national acts that visited the club, particularly Billie Holliday, but had no success with his efforts at selling his songs. Still, Gordy's sisters introduced him to Al Green, the white owner of the Flame Show, who also managed musical acts as a side business. Among the artists managed by Green was Jackie Wilson, who Gordy knew from his boxing days. Like Gordy, Wilson had also hung up his gloves and instead sought success in music. Wilson was initially a replacement member of the Doo-Wop group "The Dominoes," but went solo in 1957. Drawing upon his past relationship with Wilson, Gordy successfully sold Wilson one of his pop songs, "Reet Petite," and the song was released in August of 1957.

As a single, "Reet Petite" was a modest success. The song itself was co-written by Gordy, Gwen Gordy and Roquel "Billy" Davis, Wilson's cousin. Dick Jacobs produced the record, which was released on Brunswick Records. It peaked at #62 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in September of 1957. Still, the song was enough to give Wilson's solo career a strong start. Pleased by the song's success, Gordy asked Wilson if he could write more songs for Wilson. Wilson obliged Gordy's request. Over the next two years, Wilson would record five more of Gordy's compositions, all

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<sup>20</sup>Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 13

of which were a collaboration between Gordy, Davis, and Gwen Gordy: “Lonely Teardrops,” “That’s Why (I Love You So),” “To Be Loved,” and “I’ll Be Satisfied.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, the trio’s success in writing songs for Wilson caught the attention of other black artists. Davis had connections to Chicago’s Chess Records, and the label utilized the trio’s services for their own artists, including Etta James.

Despite the acclaim that came through songwriting, Gordy became disillusioned with not having control over the final sound of the recorded song and decided to switch to record producing. In addition, Gordy began to build up a portfolio of artists, for whom he could write, produce, and manage. The most notable member of this portfolio was a group called “The Matadors,” whom Gordy met in late 1957 after their failed audition for Brunswick Records. The group was headed by 17-year old William “Smokey” Robinson.<sup>22</sup> Gordy saw a great deal of potential in the talent and stage presence of Robinson, who would become a major artistic and managerial mainstay at Motown for decades to come. In addition, Robinson was also a budding songwriter, and Gordy sought to utilize Robinson’s skills so that he could focus more on production.

Although Gordy would claim artistic reasons for branching away from songwriting, economic considerations were pressing. Gordy’s notoriety in song writing did not translate into financial success. He and his wife Thelma were still in the process of divorcing, and Gordy had to pay informal alimony and child support for their three children. Gordy also still had debts from the failed 3-D Record Mart. While Gordy was indeed receiving songwriting royalty checks from the songs he had

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<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.* 13.

<sup>22</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 23.

written with his sister and Davis, the money had to be split three-ways. Gordy, tired of being beholden to record companies and their low wages, decided to set out on his own. In January of 1959, Gordy borrowed \$800 from his family and started Tamla Records.<sup>23</sup>

The first act signed to Tamla Records was the former Matadors, who had changed their name to the Miracles at Gordy's urging. Other acts followed, including The Temptations, Martha and the Vandellas, and Tammi Terrell, most drawn from neighborhoods near Gordy's offices.<sup>24</sup> In addition, most of Motown's early administrative staff was made up of members of the Gordy family, particularly his sisters Esther and Loucye, who set up the business offices. Even Gordy's father worked at the label, volunteering his services as a maintenance worker. Gordy used his connections with Chess Records to distribute records for Tamla. Primarily, Gordy made the artistic decisions of Tamla, but Robinson had a growing influence of his own with the label's creative department. Gordy mainly drew upon Detroit's various gig artists to make up the label's studio musicians, and he typically paid far under union minimums for musicians. Most never complained of the low wages, since it was regular work and opportunities were otherwise limited in Detroit.<sup>25</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Gordy was not the first member of his family to start a record label; rather it was his sister, and writing partner, Gwen. In late 1958, she and Billy Davis decided to form a label, which would be known as Anna Records (named after Anna Gordy). Davis used his contacts at Chicago's Chess Records to distribute the records. The duo initially sought Gordy to be President of their label, but Gordy ultimately decided against it in order to form his own label. Anna Records was ultimately absorbed by Motown in 1960, which brought artists into Motown initially signed by Anna, including David Ruffin (who would later be the lead singer of the Temptations) and Marvin Gaye (who was at the time a studio drummer hired by the Anna Records), as well as songwriter-producer Lamont Dozier (who would become a part of the prolific Holland-Dozier-Holland production team).

<sup>24</sup> Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

first song released on the Tamla label was Marv Johnson's "Come to Me" in May of 1959. The Doo-wop track was co-written by Gordy and Johnson. Much like the early "Reet Petite," "Come to Me" was a respectable hit that drew national attention for the upstart label, peaking at #30 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and #6 on the R&B charts. However, in order to get national distribution for the record, Gordy had to partner with United Artist records.

The biggest early hit for Gordy and his young record label was the early 1960 release "Money (That's What I Want)" by Barrett Strong.<sup>26</sup> Co-written by Gordy, the song was released nationally on his sister's Anna Records, who had the stronger relationship with national distributors. The song was a spectacular hit, peaking at #23 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and #2 on the R&B charts.<sup>27</sup> The success of "Money" emboldened Gordy, who sought to bring all aspects of music production and distribution in house. Gordy figured he could have more control of the final product and would receive more of the royalties if he no longer had to utilize other labels for national distribution. This refocus of the company also corresponded with Gordy's founding of Jobete Publishing in late 1959.<sup>28</sup> Having a company to publish the songs he wrote for Tamla Records gave Gordy more of a cut of the record sales. In addition, Gordy began the process of changing the name of Tamla Records to

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<sup>26</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 26.

<sup>27</sup>The song was also covered several times, most notably by the Beatles in 1963. Gordy encouraged the covers since it equaled more royalty checks for the label and himself.

<sup>28</sup> The name "Jobete" came from Gordy's three eldest children: **Joy**, **Berry IV**, and **Terry**.



Motown, a reference to Detroit's moniker as the Motor City, in early 1960, a move that was completed by mid-1960.<sup>29</sup>

The first major success for this reorganized company was "Shop Around" by the Miracles. Written by Robinson and Gordy, the song would become the label's first #1 record, topping the R&B charts, as well as hitting #2 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. "Please Mr. Postman" by the Marvettes, which would top both charts, followed up this success.<sup>30</sup> Both songs were produced and released fully in-house by Gordy and were huge financial boons for the company.

No longer having to give cuts of the record sales to other companies meant Gordy received more of the profits, and he decided to reinvest in expanding the business in late 1961 and early 1962. In addition to pre-established acts Gordy signed to Motown, the popularity of the record label brought in local artists from Detroit who might otherwise not have gotten the chance to be heard by a national audience. In an attempt to save costs, Gordy decided to move Motown's business office and recording facilities to a single house on Detroit's West Grand Boulevard, located in a middle-class black neighborhood. The house would later become better known as Motown's iconic Hitsville, USA Studios. The house became a draw for Detroit's young singers and aspiring artists. Although Detroit was a large urban African-American center, the national record labels underserved it in terms of

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<sup>29</sup> Although the label was almost exclusively called "Motown" by the general public and in-house after 1961, many of its records were technically released on the "Tamla" imprint through 1981. For ease of understanding, the term "Motown" will be used as a catch-all for the various labels and subsidiaries Gordy founded.

<sup>30</sup> Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 171.

recruitment and recording. Therefore, Gordy had a large, relatively untouched, talent pool from which to draw upon for his expanding record label.

Aside from artists, Gordy also added producers and executives who would be important in Motown's continued success. Brothers Brian and Eddie Holland joined Lamont Dozier (who had come over to Motown with the absorption of Anna Records) to form the prolific Holland-Dozier-Holland production team, who were responsible in creating many hits and cementing what would become known as the "Motown Sound." Eddie Holland previously had worked off and on with Gordy since 1958 as an artist, but had limited success due to his crippling stage fright. His brother Brian worked at Motown as a staff songwriter, whose biggest success prior to forming the production team was co-composing "Please Mr. Postman." Within the group, Dozier and Brian Holland composed and produced the songs, while Eddie Holland wrote lyrics and arranged vocals. From 1962 to 1967, they would write and produce several songs for Motown artists, including 25 #1 singles.<sup>31</sup>

In order to enhance the label's marketability to the white mainstream, Gordy made two key hires. The first was Barney Ales, a white man, to serve as executive vice-president for Motown. Gordy knew having a white person in the label would aid in ensuring the white national distributors and record sellers would pay the royalties and other monies owed to the company.<sup>32</sup> In addition, having a white person in such a high office would give the label an air of respectability and security. The second such hire by Gordy was etiquette coach Maxine Powell who was brought

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<sup>31</sup> George *Where Did Our Love Go?* 41.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.* 39.

on to make Motown artists presentable and respectable to white audiences. Artists who signed to the label had to go through an etiquette 'boot-camp' that focused on the manner in which the artists talked, walked, gave interviews, dressed, and other elements of their public persona.<sup>33</sup>

Even with several hit records, Motown's financial success was limited during its first three years of existence. From 1959 to 1962, Motown only brought in \$100,000 dollars a year in sales, which did not net the company too much in profit.<sup>34</sup> While Motown was gaining national notoriety, Gordy wanted to expand Motown's exposure and decided to set up a national tour for Motown artists. The tour, which began in 1962, was quite lengthy and had several stops on the South's "Chitlin' Circuit."<sup>35</sup> Although Motown was popular in Detroit and the Northeast, it still had yet to make inroads with the large black population of the South, as well as other regions of the country. The show was set up as a revue, with artists and positions being swapped in and out according to their popularity or experience.<sup>36</sup> New acts could be added with short notice, since particular stars were not being advertised, but rather the label as a whole. The brutality of the tour's schedule, in terms of dates, gave a great deal of exposure to Motown's artists, and even made new stars out of previously unknown people. The best example of this phenomenon was Stevie

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<sup>33</sup> Margalit Fox. "Maxine Powell, Motown's Maven of Style, Dies at 98" *New York Times*. October 16, 2013. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/17/arts/music/maxine-powell-motowns-maven-of-style-dies-at-98.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/17/arts/music/maxine-powell-motowns-maven-of-style-dies-at-98.html?_r=0)

<sup>34</sup> Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 42.

<sup>35</sup> The term 'Chitlin' Circuit' referred to theaters and other venues, primarily in the South, that were deemed safe and suitable for African-American performers in the time of Jim Crow.

<sup>36</sup> George *Where Did Our Love Go?* 42.

Wonder, who was only 11 years old when he signed to the label. His first single, “Fingerprints: Part 2,” was the recording of an impromptu piano session during a Motown Revue concert in June 1962 in Chicago.<sup>37</sup> The song was a massive success, topping at #1 on both the *Billboard* Hot 100 and R&B charts.

Based upon the success of the Motown Revue concerts, as well as growing public awareness, Motown and Gordy experienced years of unprecedented profitability beginning in 1963. Other groups replicated the success of Stevie Wonder and continued Motown’s trend of hit singles among mainstream audiences. Martha and the Vandella’s “Heat Wave” was a smash hit for the summer of 1963, topping #4 on the *Billboard* charts. The group followed the success of “Heat Wave” with “Quicksand”, which peaked at #8. Smokie Robinson and the Miracles had two top 10 songs during the year with both “You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me” and “Mickey’s Monkey” reaching #8.<sup>38</sup> The success of these records resulted in massive sales for Motown. By the end of 1963, the company had grossed \$4.5 million in sales.<sup>39</sup> Not only did this increase in sales give Gordy more personal fame and wealth, it also corresponded to the public’s perception of the label as whole. Motown became a symbol for black Detroit, as well as one for black respectability in the mainstream. As Motown became more synonymous with black respectability, Gordy sought more ventures that supported this claim. In 1963, Motown released its first spoken word album: “The Great March to Freedom,” a recording of a Dr. Martin

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<sup>37</sup>James E. Perone. *The Sound of Stevie Wonder: His Words and Music*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006) 2.

<sup>38</sup>Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 171.

<sup>39</sup>Smith, *Dancing in the Streets*. 14.

Luther King, Jr.'s speech given on June 23, 1963, in Detroit.<sup>40</sup> The record began a tenuous, but working, relationship between the two men, although Gordy was baffled when King wanted his share of the profits to go to the Southern Christian Leadership Committee, and not kept personally.

With the success of 1963, Gordy added even more staffers and artists. Although publically committed to portraying itself as an African-American company, Motown added more and more white executives, with black workers typically regulated to lower levels of employment unless they were members of the Gordy family. Although Gordy tried to justify the practice as trying to keep up professionalism, members of Detroit's black community were beginning to murmur the move was indicative of Gordy not being fully committed to the plight of African-Americans, accusations that would continue throughout the Civil Rights era.<sup>41</sup>

As successful as Motown was in 1963, 1964 was an even more successful year in elevating the company's public perception, as well as its bottom line. Mary Wells scored a #1 hit with "My Guy", and Martha and the Vandellas "Dancing in the Street" charted at #2 on *Billboard*.<sup>42</sup> The summer of 1964 brought Gordy his pet project and artistic obsession, The Supremes. Although the act had been signed to Motown since 1961, they had never made a major impact.<sup>43</sup> That changed in the summer of 1964, when "Where Did Our Love Go?" became a monster smash topping

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<sup>40</sup>*Ibid*, 17.

<sup>41</sup>Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 114.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid*. 172.

<sup>43</sup>Prior to the summer of 1964, the group was often called the "No-hit Supremes" in the Motown offices.

#1 on *Billboard*. Seemingly overnight, the Supremes gained national recognition and became the showpiece of Motown. The success of “Where Did Our Love Go?” was followed up that same year by two more #1 singles: “Baby Love” and “Come See About Me.” In addition, The Supremes were the first Motown group to appear on the Ed Sullivan show on December 27, 1964. The Sullivan show became a regular venue for Motown artists and not only brought widespread exposure to the record company, but Gordy also believed it signaled a growing integration of African-Americans into mainstream culture and greater racial acceptance. As the Supremes were gaining more popularity, Gordy singled out singer Diana Ross as a focal point for Motown’s publicity, as well as his own personal interest. Gordy treated Ross, and the Supremes by proxy, very differently than his other artists. Prior to his interest in Ross, songs at Motown were divvied up generally, with different artists getting the chance to perform the same song, with the best recording being released. This sense of competition resulted in hit records coming from a variety of places, and no one artist singled out as needing a push. This was not the case with Ross and the Supremes.<sup>44</sup> In time, Gordy would undercut his own artists in order to ensure Ross’ spotlight. This is most keenly felt with Florence Ballard, a fellow member of the Supremes with Ross. Ballard was considered to have the best voice of the quartet, but was overweight and deemed not as attractive as Ross. Believing Ballard to be a distraction from Ross, Gordy eventually replaced Ballard in 1967 without her

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<sup>44</sup>Roynoma Singleton. *Berry, Me, and Motown: The Untold Story*. (New York: Contemporary Books, 1990) 186

knowledge, dumbfounding the singer. Ballard tried to have a career outside of Motown, but it never took off. She died in 1976 of substance abuse problems.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless, the Supremes headlined Motown in 1965 and brought further success. The group had three #1 songs that year: “Stop! In the Name of Love,” “Back in My Arms Again,” and “I Hear a Symphony.”<sup>46</sup> Two male groups supplied Motown’s two other #1s of the year, the Temptations with “My Girl” and the Four Tops with “I Can’t Help Myself.”<sup>47</sup> Motown’s success expanded beyond the top single spot, with 15 other songs charting on *Billboards* top #20 for the year. Motown was one of the most successful record companies in America, selling more 45s than any other label in the country.<sup>48</sup> Despite the surge of the “British Invasion,” with the popularity of groups like the Rolling Stones and Beatles, Motown remained incredibly successful.

Despite the success of Motown, outside of his interest in Ross, Gordy was less and less involved in the running of his record label. He became more isolated and reclusive, despite the fact his records were selling very well worldwide. By 1966, Gordy had stopped writing songs and had turned over most of the day-to-day operations to Barney Ales.<sup>49</sup> Although Smokey Robinson became the main creative force in Gordy’s absence, it was Ales and other white officials who made the executive decisions for the company. As Civil Rights became more of a national issue, and although Gordy was seen as a symbol for black entrepreneurialism and

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<sup>45</sup> The plight of Ballard, Ross, and Gordy was the basis for the musical *Dreamgirls*.

<sup>46</sup> Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 172.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 66.

<sup>49</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 141.

respectability, he prohibited his artists from publically supporting the issue. Gordy tried incredibly hard to keep his label non-committal on Civil Rights, and instead, focused on the production and selling of hit records. Gordy was interested in promoting black thought when he felt it could be profitable, such as signing an aging Langston Hughes to record an album of poetry, yet he stayed away from discussing contemporary issues.<sup>50</sup> Gordy did not want to make a social stand with his records, but rather keep selling the pop songs that were inoffensive to the general public. His focus paid off in 1966 with four #1s (“You Can’t Hurry Love”, “You Keep Me Hanging On”, and “Love is Here and Now You’re Gone” by the Supremes and “Reach Out I’ll Be There” by the Four Tops), as well as a whopping 42 other songs that made the *Billboard* top 20.<sup>51</sup>

Gordy’s stance on Civil Rights would be put to the test after the 1967 Detroit Riots. Although the Riots did not directly effect the “Hitsville, USA” studios, they demonstrated Detroit’s black population was not as harmonious and content as the image Motown’s records sought to promote.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the Civil Rights movement became more militant, with leaders such as King falling out of favor with young black activists, who instead looked to more confrontational tactics. Once again, Gordy hoped to keep Motown non-committal on Civil Rights. He publicly distanced himself from the more radical Civil Rights protestors and instead sought to preserve the image of public amicableness.

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<sup>50</sup> Although Gordy inked the deal with Hughes in 1963, the production lagged in development and was ultimately squashed by Hughes death in 1967. Smith, *Dancing in the Streets*. 94.

<sup>51</sup> Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 172-174.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Dancing in the Streets*. 198.



As part of this attempt to keep up the persona of public agreeableness and renew its commitment to the city of Detroit, in the early spring of 1968, Motown moved from its suburban Hitsville, USA studios to the ten-story Donovan Building in downtown Detroit.<sup>53</sup> The move was part of an urban renewal plan for the city, as well as the embodiment of a public commitment made by Gordy to stay in the city despite its racial tensions. The Detroit press initially hailed the office complex, dubbed “Motown Center,” as a boon for the city. The *Michigan Chronicle* wrote that Motown’s move would “play a vital role in the rebuilding of a New Detroit” and “be one of the largest buildings housing a business owned and operated by Negroes in the country.”<sup>54</sup> Many within Motown did not like the move, however, finding the new offices cold and lacking the homey warmth of the old studio. In addition, by leaving behind the black community in favor of a white dominated landscape, the move was seen as a cementing of Motown’s corporate stance.

Although Gordy was still wary of Motown being fully associated with the Civil Rights movement, 1968 also corresponded with Gordy (and Motown by extension) aligning itself with non-radical groups within the movement. Despite being hesitant to speak out in support of Civil Rights, the assassination of Dr. King in April of 1968 stunned Gordy. Despite their differences, Gordy admired King and appreciated their working relationship. King’s death caused Gordy to make his most overtly political gesture as owner of Motown, allowing Motown artists to perform for a fundraiser for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in May of the same year. The

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<sup>53</sup> George *Where Did Our Love Go?* 149.

<sup>54</sup>Smith, *Dancing in the Streets*. 198.

concert raised \$25,000 for the SCLC, and in appreciation, King's widow presented Gordy with a plaque acknowledging his support.<sup>55</sup> In addition, due to Gordy's influence, Motown participated in the "Detroit is Happening" campaign of 1968. The campaign, initiated by a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to Detroit's Youth Opportunity Program, sought to provide "good job opportunities, educational facilities and a cultural center" for Detroit's youth.<sup>56</sup> In addition, the program had the larger goal of convincing the public of Detroit's stability following the 1967 Riots. Motown was showcased in the commercials for the campaign as being proud of being from Detroit and committed to the city's future. Motown also produced two theme songs for the program. The first was a revision of the Supreme's "The Happening" entitled "Detroit is Happening," which included a monologue from Detroit Tigers outfielder Willie Horton. The second was an entirely new song written by Smokey Robinson called "I Care About Detroit." This song contains lyrics that affirm Gordy's milquetoast and anti-radical stance on social issues: "Yes, I'm proud to call this city my hometown/It's been good to you and me/Let's learn to live and work in harmony" and "There's so much important work still to be done/ Let's not lose all the gains that we've won."<sup>57</sup> Although the Civil Rights movement was becoming more militant, Gordy was staunch in staying acceptable to the mainstream. Motown hoped to both appease its base in the black community and keep its foothold within the white corporate world.

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<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.* 216

<sup>56</sup> Smokey Robinson and the Miracles "I Care About Detroit". Motown Records. 1968.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

During 1968, the first cracks in Motown's success began to appear. Upset over unfair contracts and low pay, despite being the driving creative force behind the label's biggest stars, the Holland-Dozier-Holland production team became irreversibly disgruntled with Gordy and Motown. The team began to slow down their previously prolific production. In August of 1968, Motown sued the trio for \$4 million for breach of contract and damages for their lack of productivity. In response, HDH counter-sued Motown for \$22 million for fraud, conspiracy, and breach of fiduciary relationships committed by the label.<sup>58</sup> Although the suit was eventually settled out of court with a non-disclosure agreement, the damage was done to Motown's façade. No longer did Gordy have the appearance of total control over his label and employees. The departure of the HDH team set off a small exodus of other artists and producers leaving the label, including Brenda Holloway and Chuck Johnson. However, despite being out of Gordy's control, none of the artists who left Motown were as successful without the label's backing. For Gordy's faults, the machine he had built at Motown was proficient at making stars and selling records. Despite the turmoil, Motown was able to score two #1 hits in 1968 ("Love Child" by The Supremes and "I Heard it Through the Grapevine" by Marvin Gaye) as well as 14 other songs that made it above #20 on the *Billboard* charts.<sup>59</sup>

In 1969, Gordy became more drawn to Los Angeles, despite his public commitment to Detroit. His interest in Los Angeles was partially due to his obsession with making Diana Ross the biggest star possible. In the late 1960s, Gordy

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<sup>58</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 152.

<sup>59</sup> Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 174.

began a movie-making department at Motown, conceived to find a star-making film for Ross. He also purchased a mansion in Beverly Hills, which would be known as “Motown West” to serve as the company’s base of operations in California, as well as his personal residence.<sup>60</sup> One of Gordy’s first acts upon moving to Motown West was to send for a family of brothers from Gary, Indiana. This group would be the last great act to come from the Motown machine: the Jackson 5. The group, presented to have been ‘discovered’ by Diana Ross, would have immediate success for the label, with their first three singles (“I Want You Back”, “ABC” and “The Love You Save”) hitting #1 on the *Billboard* Hot 100.<sup>61</sup> The Jackson 5 appealed to Gordy, and he once again became an active member of the creative process after years of becoming less and less interested in the music business. Although Motown was struggling back in Detroit, the Jackson 5 were hugely successful, but their success overshadowed looming issues. Nevertheless, Motown finished out the decade strong, having 20 songs place above #20 on *Billboard* with three number ones.<sup>62</sup>

Gordy was eventually able to find a film he believed would be a star-making vehicle for Ross in *Lady Sings the Blues*, a biographic film on the life of Billie Holiday.<sup>63</sup> The film was a disaster in the making, going over budget and plagued by the diva attitudes of both Ross and Gordy. The film was initially a joint production

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<sup>60</sup>Singleton. *Berry, Motown, and Me*. 198.

<sup>61</sup> Gordy believed he had a surefire hit with the Jackson brothers and that linking them with Ross would similarly raise her profile.

<sup>62</sup>Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 174-175.

<sup>63</sup>Holliday was one of the artists Gordy tried to hustle to buy his songs at the Flame Show Bar back in the 50s. By all accounts, Gordy was inspired by the singer, and regretted he was never able to sell her one of his songs.

between Paramount Pictures and Motown's new film division. However, Gordy clashed with Paramount executives often and caused the filming to drag on. Production was delayed due to Ross' pregnancy and birth of her first child in the summer of 1971.<sup>64</sup> Eventually, Gordy repaid Paramount their initial investment of \$1 million to gain back creative control over the production, but allowing Paramount to distribute the film. The production soared over its initial \$2 million dollar budget, eventually costing \$3.6 million to film, with \$1.6 million of the production costs paid out of Gordy's own pocket.<sup>65</sup> Still, once the movie was finally released in 1972, it was quite well received. It grossed almost \$20 million domestically and Ross was praised for her performance as Holiday. Ross even received an Academy Award nomination for best actress. Although Ross did not win, despite a pricy and extensive campaign financed by Gordy, it appeared as though she was receiving the acclaim Gordy hoped. The success of *Lady Sings the Blues* would start a string of Motown films: *Mahogany* in 1975, *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings* in 1976, and *Almost Summer and Thank God It's Friday* in 1978. None of these subsequent films were nearly as successful critically or financially as *Lady Sings the Blues*. Motown's foray into films culminated in the flop *The Wiz* in 1978, an urban retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*.<sup>66</sup> Although *The Wiz* was

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<sup>64</sup> The father of this child is Gordy. The two had a clandestine relationship for years, but it was kept very secret, with many Motown employees being unaware. Ross married music executive Robert Ellis Silberstein two months into her pregnancy, with Silberstein raising the child as his own. It was not until decades later that Gordy's paternity became common knowledge.

<sup>65</sup> Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 119

<sup>66</sup> Not only was the "The Wiz" the final Motown film, it was also credited for single-handedly ending the Blaxploitation film genre.

successful on Broadway, the film production was bloated and came in incredibly over budget.

The same year *Lady Sang the Blues* was released in 1972, Gordy also officially moved Motown's offices from Detroit to Los Angeles, cementing what had become obvious for years. Although Gordy claimed Detroit as his home it was clear his interest was in California.<sup>67</sup> Even though Motown had successful acts in the form of the Jackson 5 and Stevie Wonder, it was no longer the hit-making powerhouse in the 1970s it had been in the previous decade. In order to combat these lagging sales, the label tried to expand outside of its traditional slate of artists, branching into white artists (Rare Earth), black country musicians (Charlie Pride), and psychedelic music (The Fifth Dimension). However, Motown's diversification efforts were never very successful. What did become a solid financial base for the company during the 1970s was its release of "classic" Motown hits. Although the general public seemed cold to their newer acts, there was a solid market for their older music. As Motown struggled in the 1970s, more artists left or were let go, from 100 acts signed in 1966 to just 51 in 1973.<sup>68</sup> Even the Jackson 5 would leave Motown in 1975.<sup>69</sup> The main act that did not leave the label was Stevie Wonder, but his contract in 1975 gave him unprecedented creative control over his recording and the number of albums he would create. The deal also promised Wonder a staggering \$13 million dollars over

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<sup>67</sup> Gordy also had a growing interest in Las Vegas. Not only were Motown Artists performing more at casinos, Gordy (always a prolific gambler) was spending more time at the tables as well.

<sup>68</sup> Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 159

<sup>69</sup> The only Jackson brother who stayed was Jermaine. He had married Gordy's daughter Hazel in an extremely lavish and costly ceremony in 1973, and was unable to leave his father-in-law's company.

seven years, at the time the highest amount of money ever paid to a recording artist.<sup>70</sup> Motown had not previously given this amount of control to any artist, and it signaled Gordy's almost complete withdrawal from the music business.

Despite these setbacks, all was not bleak for Motown in the 1970s. Although they were not the cultural force they had been in the 60s, the company remained profitable thanks to artists like Lionel Richie and the Commodores, and releases of older songs in the Motown catalog. Likewise, the mystique of Motown records remained during the 1970s, with the company still viewed among many within the black community as a source of pride. However, as musical trends changed as the decade went on, Motown refused to adapt. Gordy was hesitant to embrace disco and early hip-hop music, believing the genres would not sell well. Sales for Motown decreased as Motown records became viewed as old-fashioned and a voice for a prior generation. More damaging for Motown was the departure of its president, Barney Ales, near the close of the 1970s.<sup>71</sup> With Gordy no longer particularly involved with the daily running of the label, Ales had taken up the bulk of the responsibility associated with its success. Ales' departure also corresponded with less marketing for Motown Records, as sales continued to decline.

As bad as the close of the 1970s were for Motown, the 1980s were worse. Despite its lagging popularity, Motown was profitable in the 70s. However, that changed in the 80s. The increasing popularity of rap music caught Motown completely off-guard, and the label further declined in relevance and profits. It still

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<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.* 163.

<sup>71</sup>George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 188.

had successful acts, like Lionel Richie, Rick James, and the Debarge family, but it was not enough to bolster the label as a whole. After nearly 25 years of running Motown, Gordy was even more aloof and less involved with its management. Regardless of the label's woes and his decreased connection to the company, Gordy planned a television special to celebrate the label's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1983. The "Motown 25" special was intended to be a victory lap for the company, reminding the audience of Motown's past glories, but also highlight its present promise.<sup>72</sup> Gordy hoped the special would rekindle Motown's sales and bring back a golden age like in the early 60s. However, the special was more like a museum of acts no longer with the label because of either personal issues with Gordy or the artist getting more money from another label. The artist who got the biggest boost from the special was not one currently signed to Motown, Michael Jackson, who had signed to Epic Records years before. His performance of "Billie Jean" was topped by the first demonstration of the "moonwalk" dance step the general public had ever seen. None of the Motown artists highlighted on the special gained as much notoriety as Jackson. In 1988, after years of unprofitability for the label, Gordy sold his stake in Motown for \$61 million to the MCA music group.<sup>73</sup> Gordy retained the rights to the label's back catalog and royalties from earlier releases. Since Motown's older releases and rereleases were still the most popular, Gordy was secure in a steady cash stream in addition to his payment for the sale.

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<sup>72</sup>Singleton, *Berry, Motown, and Me*. 290.

<sup>73</sup>Smith, *Dancing in the Streets*, 254.



Following his departure from Motown in 1988, Gordy surprisingly remained quiet. He never formed another label, nor did he ever return to being an executive at Motown. Instead, Gordy preferred to play the role of the elder statesman of black enterprise. He would give interviews and occasionally make appearances honoring Motown and its past glory days. In 2004, Gordy sold his final piece in Motown's past: his interest in the Jobete publishing company, which received royalties for Motown's past hits, for \$80 million to the EMI music group.<sup>74</sup>

Gordy's departure from Motown corresponded with further woes for the label. By the 1990s, Motown was a shell of its former glory. Although the label had a few popular acts, such as Boyz II Men, the acts were not as numerous, popular, nor as profitable as the slate of hit makers employed by the label 30 years earlier. The only artist remaining from Motown's pinnacle was Stevie Wonder. Motown's upper management was similarly troubled. MCA brought in numerous people to serve as president of Motown following Gordy's departure, but none succeeded in revitalizing the label. Because of this, the staff of Motown felt their new ownership group was not properly promoting the label and in 1991 sued to be released from their distribution deal. The suit was eventually settled two years later. In 1994, Polygram records bought out the entirety of Motown for the sum of \$301 million. Polygram brought in Andre Harrell to serve as president of Motown. Harrell was the founder of Uptown Records, which had become very successful within the R&B and particularly Hip-Hop genres in the late 1980s. Considering Motown had historically been hesitant to embrace rap music, Polygram believed Harrell was the man who

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<sup>74</sup> Gordy had previously sold EMI a half-stake in the royalties in 1997 for \$132 million. Brian Garrity, "EMI Now Full Owner Of Jobete" *Billboard*; 4/10/2004, Vol. 116 Issue 15, p61

could reverse Motown's fortunes. In order to become president of Motown, Harrell was given a \$30 million 5-year deal with \$20 million given as a signing bonus. However, Harrell was fired from Motown only two years later in 1997. His tenure at Motown was troubled, and he was unable to bring the same level of success and popularity amongst the young audience he had with Uptown. Polygram Records also had financial woes and was bought out by Seagram records, with Motown being absorbed into the Universal Music Group in 1999. It remained a subsidiary until 2005, when it was merged with Universal Records to form Universal Motown Records. This merger lasted until 2011, when Motown was reorganized under the Island Def Jam Music Group subsidiary of the Universal Music group. However, there was a change in 2014, when the Universal Music group reorganized once again and made Motown into its own separate entity.

Although several different groups have purchased and owned Motown over the years, all have seen value in the Motown name as a brand, as well as the nostalgia the label brought about among general audiences. Despite not being current with the popular trends, Gordy's most enduring legacy of Motown was the image of black respectability he had crafted. Gordy was able to become a major success among the white mainstream concurrent with the anxiety and occasional violence of the Civil Rights era. Due to his purposeful efforts in crafting a particular image of his artists, label, and himself, Motown was not viewed in the same light as other black organizations during the 1960s, and became very successful because of this difference. This persona of respectability is why companies were, and are still willing to pay for the prestige of the Motown name decades after its heyday. The

primarily value of Motown was not in its artists or music, but rather in the image Gordy had crafted for his company and its depiction in the mainstream.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: THE ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DECISION OF BERRY GORDY**

The failure of the 3-D Record Mart changed Berry Gordy. Gordy initially believed that selling jazz music, his favorite genre, would provide his growing family with financial stability. Tastes in music changed, however, and jazz fell out of favor with customers. The loss of the store demoralized Gordy, who was forced to take an job at the Lincoln-Mercury assembly line in order to make ends meet for his growing family. Yet even on the line, Gordy still dreamed of finding success in the music business. Despite diminished prospects and minimal financing, Gordy held fast to the belief his next music venture would be a success, and his desire to become an economic success no matter the genre guided his decision making at Motown.

Because of the limited funds Motown had at its onset as compared to larger record companies, Gordy had to be sure the records he did release were profitable and hits.<sup>1</sup> While larger companies could release several records knowing that the money earned by hits would offset the cost of unpopular songs, Motown initially could not afford even a single unsuccessful record. Therefore Motown released fewer records than other companies, but those released tended to be more polished and honed to appeal to as wide of an audience as possible.

Although born out of necessity, there were advantages to only releasing a small number of records. Distributors could be more easily convinced to purchase Motown's records if they were few in number and always sold fairly well. The limited and usually successful releases gave both Motown and the records an air of

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<sup>1</sup> For Gordy, a 'hit' was initially defined by making the top 40 on the Billboard R&B charts, which later grew to Billboard's Pop charts once Motown had crossed over into mainstream appeal.

mystique. Likewise, producing a fewer records cut down on manufacturing, advertising, promotion, and distribution costs. Although more time and effort was spent on the front end to create these honed records, their low volume cut down on the costs in order to bring them to the public.

There was a huge risk in making a small amount of records, though. Even a small string of unsuccessful records could sink the business. Furthermore, ensuring a record would be a hit was an impossible proposition. At the time of Motown's inception, 77 percent of all albums and 80 percent of all singles did not make back the money spent to create them.<sup>2</sup> Motown could literally not afford for any of its songs to lose money.

In order to protect the solvency of the company, Gordy took excessive control over all aspects of the production of Motown songs. Gordy berated his songwriting team to write only hits and was not shy about expressing his displeasure with their output, even if he personally liked the individual. For instance, the first hundred songs written by Smokey Robinson were rejected by Gordy, despite Robinson being one of Gordy's closest friends and the second-highest ranking creative team member after Gordy.<sup>3</sup> Once a song made it to the recording stage, Gordy was similarly hard to please. He called for numerous takes of songs and forced musicians to change minute details in order create what he deemed the best sound. He would call for several remixes and re-mastering of records, changing minute details with the treble, bass, and instrumental levels, despite no one else having any problem with

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. (New York: Grove Press, 1979) 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 25.

the initial product. Even after they were released, songs were not safe from Gordy's tinkering. The Four Tops' "I Can't Help Myself" had already debuted on the Billboard charts, when Gordy ordered it redone with an improved mix for later pressings.

The creation of Motown's records was a collective effort, with the different elements of song creation operating autonomously of each other. At Motown, songwriters initially pitched songs to the other writers and Gordy in a semi-competitive environment. Once a song was deemed worthy by the other writers, with Gordy having the final say, the song would be transitioned to production. In production, a similar process would occur, with different producers and artists jockeying in order to claim the rights to the song. After an artist and producer were attached to the song, it would go into the studio. During the recording process, the same set of studio musicians were used, musicians who had no bearing on the songwriting or performing of the song. Once a song was recorded, it was sent to be manufactured, distributed, and sold to the listening audience.

Gordy called this process of making records the 'assembly line' and claimed inspiration from Detroit's automobile factories. This description was partially accurate. Motown employees did tend to work in segmented departments with little crossover when it came to record creation. Likewise, the sales, distribution, and front office were autonomous from the rest of Motown. The comparison to an assembly line, however, was disputable for two reasons. First, Motown had a combination of communal and competitive work when it came to the production of records. All Motown employees had a chance to vote on a record and state their belief as whether or not it would be a hit. Likewise, if two artists or producers

wanted to record the same song, both were allowed to do so, and the recording deemed superior would be the one released. The second subversion of the assembly line moniker is that Gordy had the ability to assert himself at any point of the song making process and take complete control. Gordy could single-handedly overrule any vote taken by Motown employees, as well as take a song away from an artist or a producer. Although Gordy might claim his hit records came from autonomous workers each working upon a separate element of the song, ultimately his ability to override any element of the process subverts such claims. Gordy's use of the assembly line metaphor also implied all of the songs which came out of Motown were hit records. Since new records were made using the same Motown technique as previous hits, Gordy hoped the mystique of Motown's assembly line would assure the customers that all Motown releases were of the same quality and worthy of purchase.

Gordy's hands-on managerial style resulted in records that were highly crafted and the result of numerous takes. In addition, Gordy fine-tuned minute details in order to ensure the resulting song met his standards. Chief amongst Gordy's criteria for Motown's records was that the song be a hit. In order to best guarantee a hit, Gordy was insistent everything that came out of Motown was mass-marketable. In order to achieve mass-marketability, the songs' content needed to be universal in its message, usually to the point of being saccharine. The most common subject, by far, in Motown's releases was love and romance. Although Motown artists and producers often desired more substance in their songs aside from stereotypical young love, Gordy would refuse their requests. Gordy believed the

subject of romance was universal enough to appeal to a mainstream audience. In addition, the syrupy depiction of romance in Motown's songs such as "My Guy", "Pride and Joy", and "The One Who Really Loves You," was so inoffensive in order to preclude itself from protest from white audiences.

Despite the protests of Motown's artists and producers, Gordy's insistence on sappy romantic songs continued because it was incredibly effective. Motown's songs were almost devoid of race or racial issues in their depiction of young love. Despite Gordy having a large resource of untapped black voices in Detroit, he decided not to include their unique experiences in order to increase their marketability. At no point in Motown's love songs did they mention race, growing up in a lower/working-class existence, or even living in Detroit's urban environment, even though those three characteristics applied to nearly everyone involved in the creative process. This omission was the result of Gordy's control over Motown's production.

The sentimental nature of Motown's songs was in stark contrast to Chess, Stax, and other record labels that primarily recorded African American artists. Part of this difference was due to ownership, as well as the intended audience of their records. Chess and Stax were both owned by white individuals. Chess was started by Polish immigrants Leonard and Phil Chess, while Stax was owned by the siblings Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton. In addition to white ownership, these two record labels had different financial goals than Motown, primarily in that they sought to appeal to a black audience, while Motown was hoping to have as broad of a mainstream appeal as possible. Stax and Chess were comfortable in appealing to a niche market



of African-Americans and could be more “authentic” in their musical offerings and marketing. This was keenly reflected in the types of music recorded: Stax and Chess Records specialized in the blues, gospel, and jazz. While Motown would record these genres, and Gordy’s personal favorite genre was jazz, it was first and foremost a pop record company. Gordy had mainstream designs for his company, and he believed focusing on the blackness of his artists would ultimately impede Motown’s marketability for the primarily white listening audience necessary for Motown’s profitability. Gordy’s belief paid off in terms of sales and popularity as compared to Stax. For example, from 1961 to 1976, Stax Records placed 167 songs in the Billboard Top 100.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, from 1961 to 1971, Motown had 163 songs in Billboards Top 20.<sup>5</sup>

Gordy’s downplaying of his artists’ blackness would result in criticism of Motown. Although Motown’s critics recognized the label’s popularity and appreciated the financial gains it was bringing to an otherwise limited populace in Detroit, they held Stax and Chess to be more authentically black despite having white ownership. In a 1967 article in *Crawdaddy* magazine, music critic Jon Landau acknowledged Motown’s contributions to black music, but he still hailed Stax as more “hard core” since it made black music for a purely black audience, and therefore was of a higher quality.<sup>6</sup> However, Gordy had his defenders in the African-American community during the 1960s. *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines favorably reported

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<sup>4</sup> Stax Records company website <<http://www.staxrecords.com/about/>>

<sup>5</sup> Motown company website <<http://classic.motown.com/history/>>

<sup>6</sup> Jon Landau. “A Whiter Shade of Black” *Crawdaddy* November 1967. 34.

on Gordy, Motown, and its artists. It held Motown as a positive force, since it also demonstrated the respectable middle-class black existence the magazines hoped to convey. For instance, during a 1965 *Jet* article on Mary Wells' British Tour, the magazine proudly noted that the "Negro-owned record company...is the largest producer of 45 r.p.m.s in the US," adding that the company had sold 12 million units in 1964.<sup>7</sup> No matter what the outside black community thought of Gordy and Motown's music, there was no denying its popularity. Indeed, the only reason Motown had critics was due to Gordy's insistence on focusing just on records with wide enough appeal that could become hits. Had he not been so exacting to make sure his records were acceptable to a mainstream audience, it is unlikely he would have had enough national exposure to warrant the criticism on whether Motown was authentically black to a sufficient amount. Critics would question whether Motown's music had artistic merit as an art form, but Gordy's primary attention was upon music as a commodity.

Aside from creative control, Gordy was also zealous over the public image of Motown Records and its artists. It was not enough just to produce universally appealing music, the artists performing the songs had to be similarly above reproach and acceptable to a mainstream, white audience. Gordy was not just producing music, he was also cultivating stars who he believed could be a reliable source of income. Gordy insisted that the artists signed to Motown appear and act as inoffensively and widely appealing as possible.

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<sup>7</sup> "What the Beatles Learned from Negroes" *Jet*. July 1, 1965. 62.

Gordy believed an acceptable appearance was essential for the continued success of Motown Records. He hoped the showmanship and merit of Motown's artists would bridge the racial divide and make Motown popular among white audiences. Gordy desperately coveted three particular venues: Las Vegas casinos, higher-end nightclubs (like New York's Copacabana), and national television broadcasts, especially the Ed Sullivan Show. Gordy believed success with these predominately older and white audiences would provide greater financial stability than depending on the whims of young black people. Although trends in music could be fickle, Gordy trusted that the regularity and lucrativeness of these venues would provide a strong base for Motown Records that could last for decades.

Although Gordy would use many techniques to ensure his artists were ready to be as palatable as possible for the mainstream audience, his most direct method was the etiquette boot camp and finishing school required for all Motown performers, called Artist Development. Gordy was not unique among label owners in establishing this organization, since other record labels at the time would occasionally hire outside consultants in order to fine-tune individual acts, but none had the elaborate machinery with such pervasive control as Motown's Artist Development did. Although initially operating on an informal basis prior, in 1964 the Artist Development wing of Motown Records was established.<sup>8</sup> Its goal was to transform the raw and unsophisticated lower-class Detroit youngsters who made up Motown's ranks into seasoned and highly prepared performers adept in front of any audience.

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<sup>8</sup> Nelson George. *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise & Fall of the Motown Sound*, (London: Omnibus, 1986) 87.

Gordy initially selected his brother-in-law, Harvey Fuqua, to supervise Artist Development. Fuqua initiated the school as a strict disciplinarian. Classes were held regularly, Monday through Friday, and all artists were expected to perform all elements of their performance, including singing, choreography, and on-stage banter with perfection. Fuqua would later recall of the school, “We heated the performers until they cracked, then we heated them up again.”<sup>9</sup> His wife Gwen and her sister Anna, both of whom were familiar with modeling and cosmetology, assisted Fuqua.

Despite Fuqua being named as head of the wing, it was Maxine Powell who had the most influence on Motown’s Artist Development. Powell was the proprietress of the Maxine Powell Finishing and Modeling School. Gordy had been acquainted with Powell for almost a decade, when Powell had hired the Gordy family print shop to produce programs for one of her talent and fashion shows.<sup>10</sup> Although Fuqua was initially named head of Artist Development, with Powell acting as a special outside consultant, she shortly thereafter was hired on full-time to cultivate Motown’s artists into performers suitable for Gordy’s goals.

With the hire of Powell, Artist Development moved into its own three-story house in the ever-expanding Motown complex on West Grand Boulevard. The first floor housed a dance studio for choreography, the second floor held instruments for musical arrangement and performance, and the third was used for wardrobe

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<sup>9</sup> Benjaminson. *Story of Motown*. 39

<sup>10</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 87.

design.<sup>11</sup> In addition to performance, Powell was insistent on instilling etiquette. Motown artists were given lessons on grooming, diction, table manners, and personal hygiene. Powell would often inform her students they were being groomed to perform in only two venues: Buckingham Palace and the White House.<sup>12</sup> Powell also coached Motown artists on dealing with the press and giving an unobjectionable interview. With Gordy's full blessing, she drilled her students to assert that Motown was a "wonderful opportunity and a trail-blazing institution," and even if they had issues with the label, not to mention them since "even you mother and father make mistakes".<sup>13</sup>

Aside from etiquette off-stage, on-stage coordination and choreography was of a particular interest to Artist Development. A Motown musical performance was highly scripted and prepared with no room for improvisation. Even minute details, such as the banter by the artists in between songs, were toiled over and endlessly rehearsed. Powell also wielded influence in the artists' stage presence. She encouraged the singers not to stoop while singing, nor protrude their hindquarters, believing such poor posture sent a negative message towards the audience. Likewise, pelvic thrusts and other overly sexual movements were to be done in a subdued manner to not draw undue attention. Even proven stars in Motown's hierarchy were not safe from Powell's critical eye. She chided Smokey Robinson for

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<sup>11</sup> Benjaminson, *The Story of Motown*. 38.

<sup>12</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 88.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 88.

grimacing too much on stage, and similarly criticized Marvin Gaye for closing his eyes while singing.<sup>14</sup>

Despite some resentment from the artists, the Artist Development wing of Motown Records was incredibly successful in manufacturing artists equally rehearsed for on and off-stage. Motown artists became renowned for their elaborate performances and intricate choreography, as well as their demeanor in interviews and other public appearances. Because of this strict training, Motown artists were versatile and adept at performing in front of all sorts of audiences, be it a high-end nightclub or a rowdy room of teenagers. Although some performers might begrudge its methods, there was no denying that the strident methods of Maxine Powell and Artist Development were effective in molding young kids from Detroit into seasoned performers capable of withstanding mainstream scrutiny.

However, this level of professionalism came at a cost, namely the individualism and authenticity of the artists. Gordy would not allow his artists to be their actual selves: black lower-class youths from Detroit. Instead, they had to preform within the persona cultivated at Artist Development, and remain inoffensive and, therefore, commercially profitable. To Gordy's credit, had he expected teenagers from Detroit's housing projects with no prior experience in performing or etiquette to successfully conduct themselves in front of a national audience, it is unlikely Motown would have had much lasting commercial success.

Once Gordy had perfected his Motown sound and had commercially successful artists performing around the world, he became immensely protective of

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

his achievements. Gordy typically resisted new musical trends, believing that sticking to his already established Motown sound was paramount to the label's profitability. Although other genres became popular during Motown's heyday, Gordy remained committed to preserving his creation in its original format. This resistance to change became a hallmark of Motown during its later decades of independence. Although Motown claimed to be "The Voice of Young America," as the teenagers who Motown represented at its onset grew up and a new generation took their place, Motown did not change with the times.

Throughout the 1960s, Motown was truly on the cutting edge of American pop culture. Motown acts had immense crossover appeal, popular with both black and white audiences, as well as those of all generations. As the 1970s began, Motown continued this success with the addition of the Jackson 5, who began with universal success unmatched by any of Motown's other acts. However, the success of the Jackson 5 was not indicative of Motown's other acts. Only a few years before, being on the Motown label was almost a guarantee of financial success and fame, but the label's popularity began to stagnate. Other genres became popular among black young people, including disco, funk, and particularly hip-hop. However, Motown did not deviate much from its previously winning formula of pop/R&B.

Gordy and Motown's management eventually adapted to include funk, psychedelic, and disco musicians among their catalog of artists. In addition, Motown would make other token efforts to include these new genres, such as signing Rare Earth and the Fifth Dimension, and even produce the disco movie "Thank God It's

Friday.” Regardless of these efforts, it became more evident that despite their slogan of being the “voice of young America,” Motown was behind the times.

Another cause for Motown’s hesitancy to embrace change was the genuine success of their previous formula. While the funk and psychedelic genres faltered, it was rereleases and Greatest Hits collections of their old hits that kept Motown profitable during the late 70s. The old records were a bankable commodity and made up the financial base of Motown. When faced with choosing between taking a risk in hoping to make a hit with a new generation of young people or taking the conservative route of maintaining previous success albeit at a smaller level, Gordy took the latter believing it was the wiser option. Although Motown would claim relevance among the youth audience until it was sold to MCA in 1989, its later years of independent operation prove Gordy was beholden to this old vision and did not want to deter too much from his earlier formula. The Motown 25 television special in 1985 is emblematic of this dynamic. The bulk of the acts were either reunions by early Motown artists or currently popular groups who were signed to other labels. Even Michael Jackson’s appearance, where he premiered the Moonwalk dance step during a performance of “Billie Jean,” (which would become by far the most iconic moment of the special) occurred only due to Jackson’s current record label Epic demanding he get a chance to perform a current song. If Gordy would not let Jackson perform a recent song, Epic would refuse to allow him to appear.

For Gordy to buckle under outside pressure regarding the creative direction of an artist was unheard of during Motown’s heyday. Although many of Motown’s artists hoped to write songs with substance more meaningful than Motown’s typical



milieu and provide commentary on the Civil Rights movement, Gordy refused, most notably when he initially refused to release Marvin Gaye's song "What's Going On." For years, Gordy's brother-in-law Gaye had dutifully gone along with Gordy's ideas for the singer, despite his misgivings with Gordy's direction. In particular, Gaye was never fully at ease with Gordy's desire for the singer to become a nightclub act and to perform in smaller venues. Although Gaye was adept and played the part well, he was uncomfortable with the role and privately expressed his reservations. Gaye certainly found success under Gordy's rigid direction, but he grew shiftless and erratic. After the death of singing partner Tammi Terrell, Gaye grew further secluded from the music business. A natural athlete, he decided to try out for the Detroit Lions football team, but was ultimately unsuccessful.

In the summer of 1970, Gaye returned to Motown with some of his old energy and excitement. He had written an original composition about the social ills and issues surrounding the black community. Entitled "What's Going On," Gaye believed the song was a necessary commentary on the state of black America in the face of the Vietnam War and Civil Rights violence. Its lyrics were quite blunt in its criticism: "Picket lines and picket signs/Don't punish me with brutality/C'mon talk to me/So you can see/What's going on."<sup>15</sup> Upon hearing the song, Gordy was alarmed. He initially refused to release the song, fearing it would be too radical for the mainstream audience and undo the years of goodwill Motown had built up by being apolitical and non-racial. Gordy urged Gaye to reconsider, "Marvin, you've got

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<sup>15</sup> Gaye, Marvin "What's Going On" 1970, Tamla Records.

this great, sexy image and you've got to protect it."<sup>16</sup> Gaye responded to Gordy's qualms by going on strike, refusing to record anything for Motown until "What's Going On" was released. Gaye held out for six months, until Gordy finally relented and released the song as a single, fully expecting the song to flop.

To Gordy's surprise, "What's Going On" was a bonafide hit and reached #1 on the Billboard R&B charts as well as #2 on Billboard's Hot 100. Buoyed by its success, Gaye called for a full concept album on similar subject matter. Gaye claimed to Gordy he wanted this album to protest about "Vietnam, police brutality, social conditions, a lot of stuff."<sup>17</sup> Once again, Gordy expressed his misgivings about the project, hoping Gaye would at least try to make the album more commercial. However, due to the success of "What's Going On" as a single, Gordy relented and allowed Gaye substantial creative control over the similarly titled album. The album was a critical and commercial success, selling over two million copies and reaching #6 on the Billboard chart. It also garnered Gaye two Grammy nominations.

Despite the success of this content shift, Gaye returned to the usual slate of Motown subject matter following the triumph of the "What's Going On" single and album. The success of the record was certainly felt in the one million dollar record contract Gaye signed with Motown in 1971, which was the most lucrative deal signed by a black male artist at the time. Gaye's first album after releasing "What's Going On" was a soundtrack for the Blaxploitation film "Trouble Man" in 1972, which did not contain any of the social commentary for which he had become

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<sup>16</sup> Gordy, Berry. *To Be Loved*. 302

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 302

known. His next fully original album was “Let’s Get It On” released in 1973. The album, while certainly more sexual, contained similar instrumentation to “What’s Going On,” but was devoid of any subject matter weightier than romance. It was as though Gaye had said all he needed to say on a single album and was dutifully back to being under Gordy’s creative control after getting it out of his system. Despite the acclaim of a more socially active record, Gordy felt Gaye was best suited in the role of an R&B balladeer. Although Gordy was capable of going along with Gaye’s personal creative vision, it was only for a short period of time before Gordy reverted back to taking his usual position directing all aspects of an Gaye’s public persona.

Gordy’s conservatism contrasted to the rest of the music scene, which was constantly changing and adapting to new trends. Larger mainstream labels were more willing to take risks on upstart genres than Motown, since Motown’s initial limited funding and corporate culture demanded the production of only “hits.” These other labels were more capable of taking absorbing the loss of a flop record than Motown. Because of this hesitancy, critics began to view Motown as old-fashioned as the 1960s ended and a new decade began. For instance, *Rolling Stone* blasted the Supremes as “Tom travesties” who were “locked into a plastic nightclub style of performing.”<sup>18</sup> Mary Wilson of the Supremes would later respond to “the misguided notion that a black who was singing and didn’t sound like Aretha Franklin or Otis Redding must have been corrupted in some way,” in order to defend her artistry with the group.<sup>19</sup> Still, it remained that black artists were making

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<sup>18</sup> Alice Echols. *Scars of Sweet Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin*. Macmillan. 2000. 239.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 239.

protest and other socially conscious songs on white-owned labels with Motown lagging behind. Songs like Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" on RCA/Victor and Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" on Philips were becoming popular amongst African-Americans for their content, yet Gordy's insistence on appealing to a mainstream audience prevented Motown artists from talking and performing on issues such as Civil Rights and the Vietnam War.

In addition to having pervasive control over his artists' creative output and public personas, Gordy also acted as business manager for most of Motown's acts. In his autobiography, Gordy framed his decision to start his artist management company, International Talent Management Inc. (ITMI), as a paternal measure designed to defend his artists. He claimed the initial success of Motown was overwhelming for the artists, and they looked to Gordy for business advice. Gordy recalled that ITMI served his artists by "getting them gigs, providing career guidance and negotiating with booking agents to make sure they paid their taxes," all of which were standard responsibilities assumed by an artist's management.<sup>20</sup> Gordy asserted this measure was for the benefit of his artists, who had very little financial literacy and might otherwise be targets by predatory agents.

Despite Gordy's claims of protectiveness, ITMI's business style was closed off to both the artists and the larger music business. Artists were only allowed to access Motown's business records twice a year. They were forced to take Gordy or other Motown executives at their word regarding the sales and profitability of their records. Furthermore, industry regulatory groups, including the Recording Industry

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<sup>20</sup> Gordy, Berry. *To Be Loved*. 144.

Association of America (which typically certifies gold and platinum records), were similarly barred from examining Motown's books.<sup>21</sup> In addition, by representing the artists signed to his label, Gordy was able to enact a great deal of cross-collateralization and double-dipping between Motown and IMTI. For instance, if an artist was signed as both a performer on Motown and a songwriter to Jobete, the overhead in getting their record produced could be charged against their songwriting royalties from the success of their record and collected by Gordy. Furthermore, since the artist was signed to ITMI, Gordy could take a further percentage as manager. Although none of these practices were illegal, this sort of deal would not have been agreed to by any outside artist representative since it put so much power in Motown and Gordy's hands.

Gordy was similarly short-changing his studio musicians. In the early 1960s, he promised staff musicians a salary of \$150, but for reasons only known to Gordy, their typical weekly pay was closer to \$135.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, session musicians were paid far below union scale. In 1962, Motown typically paid \$7.50 per song to an outside musician, with the possibility of adding an extra \$10 if the musician was a union member.<sup>23</sup> Even with the additional funds, this was severely under the minimums set by the musicians' union. For instance, according to American Federation of Musicians wage scale of 1960, musicians were expected to be paid around \$50 per three-hour session.<sup>24</sup> Despite the lower pay, most of the musicians

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<sup>21</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 29.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

did not verbalize any discontent with Gordy or his methods, due to the consistency of recording jobs Motown provided. If a musician performed well, Motown could become a regular source of income. Since music jobs that paid scale were sporadic in Detroit, finding a steady paycheck at Motown was appealing to most of the performers who made up the studio musicians, even if it was lower than it ought to have been. According to Earl Van Dyke, the pianist of the 'Funk Brothers' that played background instruments on most of Motown's releases, Motown was the best option in Detroit, "In that time it was rare for a musician to own his own home, but I did...Everybody had some money. If you didn't come out of Motown with some money or some property, it wasn't Berry's fault."<sup>25</sup>

Van Dyke's sentiment is echoed among most of Motown's artists and office staff. Songwriter and producer Frank Wilson raved, "I never knew I could do what I loved to and what I had to do could be related. Motown paid me to do what I loved to. My life has been marvelous! Marvelous!"<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Motown secretary turned songwriter Janie Bradford Hobbs praised Gordy's methods, "Through the miracle of Berry Gordy, I bought a house in Sherwood Forest (a pleasant Detroit neighborhood). He's responsible for the way I think, the way I feel, the things I want, and the things I reach after."<sup>27</sup> Although many recognized they were not being compensated in fair proportion to the amount of revenue they were bringing into

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<sup>24</sup> Ingrid Monson. *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa*. Oxford University Press. 2007. 38.

<sup>25</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 107.

<sup>26</sup> Benjaminson *Story of Motown*. 83.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 83.

the company, most stayed aboard because they appreciated the exposure Gordy was generating. Likewise, Gordy could be extremely generous to his popular artists, showering hit-makers with Cadillac's, furs, and other extravagant items.

The promise of extravagant gifts, however, was not enough for some Motown employees. The first major artist to jump ship from the label was Mary Wells. Signed by Motown at age seventeen, as she approached her twenty-first birthday in May of 1964, she entertained more lucrative offers from other labels. Upon receiving an offer of \$500,000 for a two-year deal from Twentieth-Century Fox Records, the "My Guy" singer made legal moves to escape her Motown contract.<sup>28</sup> Her case hinged upon having her contract with Motown ruled void since she was underage when she signed it. This came as a surprise to Gordy, especially since "My Guy" was only released in March of the same year. In addition, during a Motown-hosted twenty-first birthday party for Wells, Gordy had personally given the singer a \$5000 mink stole in appreciation for her work and his affection. Despite Gordy's best efforts to prove the amount of time and money Motown had spent on training and promoting Wells, a judge released her from her contract with Motown, allowing her to sign with 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, her career after leaving Motown paled in comparison to her previous work. Despite the best efforts of her new label, Wells was unable to recapture the popularity and lucrativeness she had at Motown. Wells' failure strengthened Motown's mystique among its artists, believing they were best served by Motown despite lower wages. Motown employee Tom Noonan recalled, "I think what happened to Wells solidified the artists that were at Motown to Motown. They

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<sup>28</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go*. 78?

said, ‘Wow look at that. She left and she was a big star and she didn’t make it. So there is something here in terms of writers and producers.’<sup>29</sup>

Despite Wells’ lack of success upon leaving Motown, some other artists did choose to leave the record label. Many early groups from the label, including the Spinners, Temptations, and Miracles (minus Smokey Robinson, who had retired from on-stage performing in 1972 to focus on his role as Vice President of Motown), would leave Motown. With the exception of Gladys Knight and the Pips, none of the groups who left Motown would find much commercial success.<sup>30</sup> Gordy took these departures in stride, believing the machinery implemented at Motown would allow for a group to effortlessly take its place. This is best exemplified by The Supremes, who upon Wells’ departure, not only were given the song “Where Did Our Love Go?” which was intended to be a follow up for Wells after the success of “My Guy,” but also Wells’ spot on Dick Clark’s “Cavalcade of Stars” tour in the summer of 1964.<sup>31</sup> Even though artists might leave for the promise of a better payday, Gordy believed the team he had in place could create stars out of anyone. “Where Did Our Love Go?” became The Supremes first big hit.

However, the departure most damaging to the crafted Motown Mystique came from within the creative team in which Gordy placed so much trust. The

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 79.

<sup>30</sup> The first song Knight released after departing Motown for Buddha Records in 1967 was “Midnight Train to Georgia”, the biggest hit and sole #1 single in her discography.

<sup>31</sup> Clark initially had misgivings about bringing such an untested act upon his tour, but Motown was insistent. Gordy even allowed Clark to pay the group \$500 a week, which was not enough to cover their traveling expenses. However, by the time the tour began, “Where Did Our Love Go?” was a hit record, and Clark renegotiated to a contract more advantageous to the group and Motown. Benjaminson. *Story of Motown*. 65.



songwriting and production team of Holland-Dozer-Holland, or H-D-H had been prolific for Motown. From 1962 to 1967, the trio had written and produced scores of songs for Motown's artists, including 25 #1 singles. However, by late 1967, the team had become frustrated with the compensation they received from Motown. Although their songs had been lucrative for Motown, H-D-H believed Gordy was withholding their fair share of the profits. Still locked into a contract, in the closing months of 1967 the trio decided to begin a work slowdown. The team, which previously had been diligent in their creation of records, did not create a single song for a nine month period. Gordy, who by this time was living in Los Angeles and not involved with the day to day operations of Motown in Detroit, was unaware of the strike for several months before being informed of the situation by Ralph Seltzer, Motown's vice-president of corporate affairs.<sup>32</sup> Gordy was apprehensive about the news, but believed he could smooth things over with the songwriters. His hope was dashed upon receiving the news that the trio had successfully negotiated with Capitol Records and left Motown.<sup>33</sup> Enraged, on August 29, 1968, Gordy sued H-D-H for breach of contract, as well as \$4 million in lost earnings.<sup>34</sup> Gordy also asked the court to prevent the trio from working with other record labels. H-D-H responded with a counter-suit for \$22 million. This suit accused Motown of "conspiracy, fraud, deceit, over-reaching, and breach of fiduciary relationships" and asked the court to put all of Motown's accounts and copyrights into receivership.<sup>35</sup> Although the suit

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<sup>32</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 150.

<sup>33</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved.* 263.

<sup>34</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 152.

was eventually settled out of court in 1977 for an undisclosed sum, the damage to Motown's reputation was already done. Gordy's depositions for the suit showed that Motown was not the black façade it portrayed, namely that Gordy was becoming an absentee owner and the labels' main decision makers were all white.<sup>36</sup> Although Gordy sought to combat the allegations by issuing press releases assuring the public of Motown's fairness in compensating their artists and its commitment to the black community, Motown's mystique was tarnished by the departure of H-D-H. Gordy could no longer claim he was in full control over all the elements of Motown, since it was evident his interest was primarily in new opportunities on the West Coast rather than his prior commitments in Detroit.

Gordy began looking westward in order to grow Motown from a record label into an entertainment conglomerate. He organized Motown Productions in 1968 to create film and television avenues for his artists. He believed the long-term success for Motown would be in expanding its brand to include television and movie production. Gordy hoped using Motown's success in music and familiarity as a brand to mainstream audiences would translate into other forms of media.

By Gordy's reckoning, he chose to make *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972) for three reasons: "To honor Billie Holliday; to continue to move Diana Ross to unparalleled heights; and to make movies."<sup>37</sup> He expected this film not only to be a star-making vehicle for Ross, but also a prestige piece that would immediately solidify Motown

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 152.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 153.

<sup>37</sup> Gordy, *To Be Loved*. 310.

as a legitimate player in Hollywood. However, despite Gordy's belief in Motown's widespread mainstream appeal, Paramount viewed the film as a risky endeavor. Paramount was hesitant to embark on the production due to the long-standing belief that black audiences were not financially solvent. In addition, despite Motown's success in the music world and Gordy's omnipresent affiliation, Paramount did not believe a biographic film on the life of Billie Holliday would be attractive to white audiences. In order to ensure *Lady* would be made, Gordy was forced to invest more and more of his own money, up to two million dollars over the film's initial budget of two million. Despite Paramount's misgivings, *Lady Sings the Blues* was a critical and commercial success. In addition, thanks to Gordy's heavy campaigning and spending, Ross' performance earned her an Academy Award nomination. Although Ross ultimately lost to Liza Minnelli, Gordy took the Academy's acceptance of Ross' first starring role as an indication that future Motown films would be similarly successful.

However, the solvency Gordy hoped would come from diversification into other forms of media eluded Motown. Partially to blame was Gordy's choice in subsequent productions. *Lady Sings the Blues* was followed up by another Ross-starring vehicle, *Mahogany* (1975). Despite being a contemporary film about the rags to riches success of a fashion student turned model, *Mahogany* was felt very similar to *Lady* in its cast and tone. Later Motown films would have the same issues of being too similar in casting. For instance, Billy Dee Williams played the leading male in four straight Motown productions: *Lady Sings the Blues*, *Mahogany*, *The Bingo Long Travelling All-Stars & Motor Kings*, and *Scott Joplin*. Gordy was also

insistent in casting Diana Ross as the female lead, even when the part called for another sort of actress. This was most glaring in Ross' casting as Dorothy in *The Wiz*. Gordy wanted Ross to act in the lead, despite the fact that Ross was 33 and the part of Dorothy was written for a teenager. But the most glaring shortcoming of Motown Films was that they were quickly pigeonholed as "black movies" by mainstream audiences and held little crossover appeal. Even when Motown tried to appeal to the mainstream with 1978's *Almost Summer*, a high-school comedy primarily with a white cast, the resulting box office receipts were disappointing. Despite Gordy's best efforts, which included moving Motown's headquarters to Los Angeles in order to be closer to movie studios, the company did not find success in the movie business akin to what it had found in the music industry.<sup>38</sup>

Motown had more success in television, but it was never as lucrative or high profile as Gordy had hoped. Early on, Motown Productions was bolstered by a working relationship with NBC. Thanks to NBC's national reach, the first Motown specials, 1968's *TCB* ['Taking Care of Business'] and 1969's *GIT on Broadway* ['Getting It Together'], received national distribution.<sup>39</sup> Both programs were variety shows, intermixed with humorous sketches, which showcased the Supremes and the Temptations. The two specials were well received, with *TCB* even garnering an Emmy nomination in 1969 for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Electronic Production. However, Motown was unable to follow up these successes with an expansion into any other sort of original television programming. Although Gordy

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<sup>38</sup> Indeed, *The Wiz* has been seen to not only represent the end of Blaxploitation, but also held by many as the reason the genre was killed

<sup>39</sup> Both specials co-starred Diana Ross and the Supremes along with the Temptations.

had hopes for Motown branching out into other sorts of television shows, the one-off musical special remained Motown Productions' primary live-action creation. Intriguingly, the only episodic television series made by Motown Productions was "The Jackson 5ive," a Saturday morning cartoon about the adventures of the Jackson brothers. The cartoon, which ran from 1971 to 1973 for twenty-three episodes, was a joint production between Motown and animation company Rankin/Bass. Although the Jackson 5 did not voice their cartoon counterparts, the show was successful in raising the group's profile. It also gave Motown an inroad with ABC, which would broadcast later Motown specials, including 1971's Jackson 5 production *Goin' Back to Indiana*. Despite the relationships with two major television networks, Motown was never able to capitalize on these associations to regularly produce Motown television content.

Gordy's decision to expand Motown into television and film stands in contrast to his contemporaries in the realm of black music. Chess, Stax, and other black record labels never produced their own television shows, movies, and other media events to showcase their artists. White labels would regularly lease out their artists to perform in other venues, but Motown was the exception in trying to create these productions in house. Among all the recording executives at the time of Motown's zenith, Gordy was unique in his desire to become a media mogul.

In all, although his interest and attention would wane as time went on, Gordy was directly responsible for the economic decisions and direction at Motown. His initial goal of making sure Motown was successful through focusing on making sure

a small quantity of records were hits for the mainstream audience was paramount at the company's founding. As Motown's reputation and profitability grew, Gordy held tight to those ideals. Even when musical trends changed and other genres came in vogue, Gordy hoped the philosophy that earned Motown's early successes and notoriety would be the reason for its continued success. While Motown might have been perceived otherwise, Gordy's financial actions in running Motown showed he was committed to selling his wares to a mainstream audience.

Although Gordy created Motown in order to sell records, in time the label grew to become a cultural institution for African-Americans throughout the country. In Motown, Gordy had crafted a depiction of black respectability within its artists that did not clash with the white sensibilities held by the majority of the nation. Because of Motown's financial success, the label became a filter that cast an acceptable image of black success to America. Gordy was well aware of the institution Motown had become and sought to maneuver the company as to best capitalize on this portrayal as a purveyor of black respectability.

The Civil Rights movement ran concurrent to Motown's rise in the 1960s, yet Gordy purposefully avoided taking a strong stand on the issue. His hesitancy also applied to the musicians and performers signed to Motown. Although many of the artists had strong feelings on Civil Rights and the plight of black people in the United States, Gordy forbade them from speaking out on the issue for fear it would damage Motown's marketability. Unlike artists like Aretha Franklin, who regularly preformed in Civil Rights protests, Motown artists were not allowed to make such a

public stand. This was not to say that Gordy was opposed to the movement as a whole, but rather, felt that his or his artists' involvement would be bad for business.

Despite Gordy's misgivings around the Civil Rights issue, he was at least nominally linked to some of the major names in the movement. Dr. Martin Luther King had a working relationship with Motown and appeared to be on cordial terms with Gordy. In 1963, Motown released two of King's speeches, "Great March to Freedom" and "Great March to Washington," as albums.<sup>40</sup> "Great March to Freedom" was recorded during King's June 23, 1963 visit to Detroit, where he gave an earlier version of the "I Have a Dream" speech that he would deliver later that summer at the March on Washington.<sup>41</sup> At a benefit for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta, Gordy presented King with a copy of the album and proclaimed, "In his speech Reverend King intelligently and succinctly explains the Negro revolt, underlines its ramifications and points the way to certain solutions. This album belongs in the home of every American and should be required listening for every American child, white or black."<sup>42</sup> Gordy also posed for a picture with King at the benefit. The picture shows a very jovial looking Gordy handing the "March to Freedom" record to a reserved King, who is flanked by actress Lena Horne and jazz composer Billy Taylor.

King's dower expression could be attributed the strained negotiations for the rights to the "Great March to Freedom" speech. Bootleg recordings of King's

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<sup>40</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved*. 249.

<sup>41</sup> Smith. *Dancing in the Street*. 21.

<sup>42</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*. August 31, 1963. Section B, 31.

speeches released by enterprising record labels, which were stopped only through court injunctions filed by the SCLC, had long plagued King.<sup>43</sup> Despite King's desire for his speeches to be heard by a wide audience, he was uncertain about dealing with such a young and relatively unproven record label.

Motown's actions in producing the record did not help their reputation in King's eyes. Gordy decided to put the record into production before he had a full agreement with King and the SCLC, believing sales would suffer if the record was not released in a timely manner. This caused concern from the SCLC, who expressed their displeasure with Gordy's actions. In order to defend himself, Gordy wrote to the Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, King's assistant on the SCLC, on July 18, 1963. In the letter, Gordy defined his royalty plan for the album, promising King forty cents for each album sold, as well as a four hundred dollar advance.<sup>44</sup> Gordy also summarized his motives for wanting to release the record: to provide more of a financial donation to the cause of Civil Rights, to be the first in a series of albums Motown would release on the issue, and to help grow the young company.<sup>45</sup> Even when speaking on Civil Rights, however, financial considerations took precedence for Gordy. He informed Walker that Motown was not willing to negotiate the royalty rate, "Although we were motivated by messianic desires to do the album, as a business operation, we could not become involved in manufacturing an item of

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<sup>43</sup> Ward, Brian. *Recording the Dream*. History Today, Volume 48, Issue 4. April 1998. <http://www.historytoday.com/brian-ward/recording-dream>

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Berry Gordy to Wyatt Tee Walker. July 18, 1963. The King Center. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-berry-gordy-reverend-wyatt-tee-walker>

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



quality without expecting a profit.”<sup>46</sup> He also closed the letter by pressuring Walker to accept the deal quickly, “In a few days, more than a month will have passed since Reverend King’s Detroit appearance. We have already affected the impact of the album with procrastination, and if we continue, we will dilute the value even more.”<sup>47</sup>

Gordy showed more deference in his telegram directly to King than in the letter to Wyatt. In the telegram, Gordy wrote, “The Motown Record Corporation is more concerned with the unity of Civil Rights organizations and the progress of the Negro in America than it is with the sale of a single record album,” before deferring to King to make his final decision.<sup>48</sup> However, economic considerations are still felt in Gordy’s appeal, “the removal of this album will represent a financial loss to us but we are prepared to do this as our contribution to the cause of unity among Civil Rights organizations.”<sup>49</sup> It is uncertain whether Gordy’s harsh tone in the letter to Wyatt or his conciliatory manner in the telegram to King was more effective, but nevertheless King and the SCLC accepted Motown’s terms and allowed the record to be released that August.

Despite the release of “Great March to Freedom,” the contention between King and Gordy was not fully alleviated. The two men disagreed on how King’s share

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Telegram from Berry Gordy, Jr. to MLK. The King Center.  
<http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/telegram-berry-gordy-jr-mlk#>

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

of the profits of the record should be spent. Gordy assumed that King would keep the forty cents per record for his personal use and the betterment of his family. However, King disagreed, telling Gordy, "There is enough confusion out there right now, as it is. I cannot allow the perception of personal gain, right or wrong, to confuse the message of the cause."<sup>50</sup> Instead, King wanted all of his royalties to go to the SCLC. Gordy was initially incredulous and tried to convince King to change his mind and take what was rightfully his. Gordy could not conceive of an individual whose convictions overrode their desire for profit. Eventually, Gordy acquiesced in King's wish for all the royalties from the album's sale to go to the SCLC.<sup>51</sup>

Although the two sides came to a resolution regarding the recording of "Great March to Freedom," there was still strife between Motown and the SCLC when it came to the sale of King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Within a month of its release in September 1963, King and the SCLC filed a lawsuit against Motown for the unauthorized production of a recording of the speech. Motown was not alone in the endeavor as two other companies, Mister Maestro, Inc. and Twentieth Century Fox, were also named in the lawsuit for similar recordings.<sup>52</sup> However, the conflict between Motown and the SCLC was not long lasting, as the SCLC dropped their suit against Motown (but not the other companies) by the end of October, which was followed up by King signing a recording contract with Motown for any future

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<sup>50</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved*. 249.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 249.

<sup>52</sup> King v. Mister Maestro, Inc., 224 F. Supp. 101 - Dist. Court, SD New York 1963. Google Scholar. [https://scholar.google.com/scholar\\_case?case=7660085334840334909&hl=en&as\\_sdt=6&as\\_vis=1&oi=scholar](https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=7660085334840334909&hl=en&as_sdt=6&as_vis=1&oi=scholar)

speeches.<sup>53</sup> This seemed to be the end of any personal conflict for King and Gordy, despite their differences in ideology. In April of 1967, King telegraphed Gordy, congratulating the executive when Gordy was awarded the Business Achievement Award from the Interracial Council for Business Opportunity. In the telegram, King praised Gordy for both his economic and social contributions, “Your contribution as a purveyor of our culture is as important contribution to the freedom movement as your creation of a sound financial institution for the employment of our people.”<sup>54</sup>

Despite the working relationship between Gordy and King, Gordy refused to allow his artists to perform or be directly affiliated with the movement. This stance changed upon King’s assassination in 1968. Gordy attended King’s funeral and publically pledged continued support for the SCLC. Additionally, when King’s widow Coretta Scott King asked for assistance in a benefit concert for the Poor People’s March shortly after King’s funeral, Gordy sent several of Motown’s biggest artists to perform, including the Supremes, Stevie Wonder, the Temptations, and Gladys Knight and the Pips.<sup>55</sup> The concert was a smashing success, raising over \$25,000 for the SCLC and the Poor People’s March.<sup>56</sup> To show their gratitude, Coretta Scott King and Ralph Abernathy, King’s successor as president of the SCLC, presented Gordy with a plaque and books of King’s speeches. Gordy was appreciative not only for his commendation, but also more centrally for the publicity Motown’s action garnered.

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<sup>53</sup> Smith. *Dancing in the Street*. 55.

<sup>54</sup> Telegram from MLK to Berry Gordy. The King Center.  
<http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/telegram-mlk-berry-gordy>

<sup>55</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved*. 251.

<sup>56</sup> Smith. *Dancing in the Streets*. 216.

Gordy's recollection of the benefit was highlighted by "marching alongside Sidney Poitier, Sammy Davis, Jr., Nancy Wilson and so many other great people."<sup>57</sup> Even when mourning a racial icon and frequent collaborator, Gordy's mind was never too far from promoting his record label.

In all, Gordy's relationship with King shows guarded distance on the part of both men. Each realized the other could be useful in achieving their goals. For King, Gordy was an avenue to get his message of non-violent protest and equality to a wider audience, while Gordy saw King as a public figure whose speeches could be a financial windfall for Motown. Despite their very different objectives and philosophies, the two were appreciative of the other's reach and were cordial. Their cordiality, however, was not friendship or equivalency. It took King's death for Gordy to publically endorse the SCLC fully. Likewise, King's initial response to finding out that Motown had produced records of the "I Have a Dream" speech without his authorization was to bring a lawsuit. This dynamic demonstrated how varied their focus and spheres of influence were. Regardless of a working relationship, King and Gordy did not have the same aims for their organizations.

Outside of Motown's working relationship with King and the SCLC, Motown's other strongest action for the cause of Civil Rights was the establishment of the Black Forum imprint in 1970. The spoken-word label was created by Motown to serve as "a medium for the presentation of ideas and voices of the worldwide struggle of Black people to create a new era...[and as] a permanent record of the

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<sup>57</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved*. 251.

sound of the struggle and the sound of the new era.”<sup>58</sup> The label’s inaugural record was a recording of a sermon King gave in 1967 entitled “Why I Oppose the War in Vietnam.” The record was a critical success and even won the Grammy for Best Spoken Word Album the following year. This album was followed up by Motown’s most radical release, Stokely Carmichael’s “Free Huey!” a 1968 speech in which the Black Power trailblazer called for the release of the Black Panther co-founder Huey P. Newton from prison.

The final release of the Black Forum label in 1970 was a collaboration between poets Langston Hughes and Margret Danner, entitled “Writers of the Revolution.” This was a posthumous release for Hughes, who had died in 1967. Intriguingly, Hughes had signed a recording contract with Motown in October 1963, with the inception of the “Writers of the Revolution” project coming shortly thereafter.<sup>59</sup> However, Gordy kept postponing the recording of the album, preferring to focus on the rising mainstream success of the Temptations, Supremes, and other Motown pop artists. By the time of the record’s release in 1970, Motown was not interested in promoting the sale of a race-conscious poetry album, and the record languished. Although Black Forum would intermediately make releases until Motown’s move to Los Angeles in 1972, none of them were commercially successful and the experiment was all but forgotten.<sup>60</sup> Had such black expression proved commercially successful, Gordy might have supported Black Forum more, but due to

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<sup>58</sup> Stokely Carmichael. Liner notes. “Free Huey!” Black Forum BF452. Motown Record Corporation. 1970.

<sup>59</sup> *Jet*, November 21, 1963. 57.

<sup>60</sup> As of the time of this writing, none of the records from Black Forum had been rereleased.

a lack of a solid consumer base, the label was abandoned. Motown never again attempted to market such overtly racial materials.

Motown's ambivalence towards Civil Rights did not go unnoticed in the black community, especially when compared to artists signed to other labels, who could be more overt in their racial statements than those allowed by Gordy. For instance, James Brown released "Say It Loud-I'm Black and I'm Proud" in 1968 for the white-owned King Records. The song was brasher and more up front with racial issues than Gordy allowed in his artists. Two year prior to Gordy hesitantly allowing Gaye to record "What's Going On?" Brown defiantly sang such lyrics as "One thing more I got to say right here/Now, we're people like the birds and the bees /We rather die on our feet,/ Than keep living on our knees."<sup>61</sup> In addition, Brown's stage show contained more sexuality and hip gyrations than was deemed acceptable by Gordy's Artist Development. This also applied to attire. Although Afros and other natural hairstyles were becoming popular among African-Americans, Gordy initially did not allow his artists to appear in the style. Likewise, their clothing could not reflect the styles influenced by hippies and the counter-culture that were becoming popular among the younger generations. By the time Gordy allowed Afros, such as with the Jackson 5, the style had lost its radicalism and was so sanitized as to be inoffensive. Gordy's aspirations of upward mobility and slick production values stood in contrast to other record labels, most notably Memphis' Stax Records. Although founded by Jim Stewart, a white man, and distributed by Atlantic Records, a white-

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<sup>61</sup> James Brown. King Records. 1968. "Say It Loud-I'm Black and I'm Proud"

owned corporation, some in the black community hailed Stax's raw and direct message as more authentic than Motown. For some musical purists, Stax's authenticity came because "its shouter's vocals were grittier, its house band's guitars were more distorted, and it used bluesy horns and organs more than strings."<sup>62</sup> Despite being of no direct financial benefit to the African American struggle, Stax was praised by critics for being truer to the black experience than the sanitized productions Gordy put on for the mainstream consumer. For instance, the magazine *New Music Express* bemoaned "the decline of Motown" and asked "what happened to the days when black music was black and not this mush of vacuous Muzak and pretentious drivel?" prior to praising the more authentic sound of gritty soul and blues music provided by Stax.<sup>63</sup>

Although Gordy, and Motown by extension, was hesitant about fully embracing an affiliation with the Civil Rights movement, he showed no qualms about being linked to Detroit's civic associations. Gordy desired to show the white status quo that made up Detroit's leadership that his company was not a racial agitator and was willing to play their part for civic improvement. A prime example of this dynamic is present in Gordy's reaction to the 1967 Detroit Riot. The riot, caused by a police raid on July 23, 1967 at a blind pig (a type of illegal bar), was the result of decades of discrimination in housing and employment against African Americans in Detroit. The resulting uprising lasted 5 days and left 34 dead, as well

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<sup>62</sup> Andrew Grant Jackson. *1965: The Most Revolutionary Year in Music* (New York: Macmillan. 2015) 141.

<sup>63</sup> Alice Echols. *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and Its Aftershocks*. (Ithica, NY: Columbia University Press. 2013) 174.

as several more injured. Around 7,200 individuals were also arrested. The riots had a large economic impact, with over 2,500 stores damaged or looted and property damage exceeding 50 million dollars.<sup>64</sup> However, even though Motown's studios on Grand Boulevard was located in close proximity to the riot's epicenter on 12<sup>th</sup> Street, it went untouched by the arson and vandalism prevalent in the riot. Furthermore, Gordy kept his studios open during the entirety of the riot. By Gordy's recollection, the decision to keep Motown open was a benevolent action. In his autobiography, he recalled ordering the offices closed, but employees came to work anyway, deeming the studio safer than their homes and that working would keep their minds off the unrest.<sup>65</sup> Although surrounded by "flames jumping, broken glass, and debris from shattered windows and looted stores," Motown operated and recorded as usual.<sup>66</sup>

Once the riots had ceased and rebuilding began, Gordy was beset by requests from various African-American groups to lend his performers for benefit concerts. Gordy rebuffed these offers, but continued an affiliation with the United Foundation's Torch Drive. The organization, founded by Henry Ford II and other Detroit industry leaders in 1949, was comprised primarily of corporate interests who were entrenched in the continuation of Detroit's status quo.<sup>67</sup> While Motown's inclusion was hailed as a united effort designed to transcend racial boundaries and

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<sup>64</sup> The Civil Unrest of 1967. Reuther Library. Wayne State University. <http://reuther.wayne.edu/node/8036>

<sup>65</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved*. 248.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 248.

<sup>67</sup> Smith. *Dancing in the Street*. 182.



promote unity among Detroit's populace, it primarily demonstrated Gordy's desire to remain as inoffensive as possible to maintain marketability.

Gordy's willingness to cooperate with Detroit's white civic elite was most centrally demonstrated by his participation in the "Detroit is Happening" campaign in the summer of 1968. Enacted by Detroit mayor Jerome Cavanagh, the campaign was designed to avoid a repeat of the riots of the previous year. Cavanagh, already reeling in criticism from his handling of the 1967 riots, believed future conflict could be staved off through a summer program that would keep Detroit's young black population otherwise occupied through employment, recreation, and educational projects. Bolstered by a \$60,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the city approached the United Foundation to lend financial support.<sup>68</sup> The United Foundation agreed and approached Motown to provide publicity for the campaign.

In order to promote the campaign, Motown recorded two theme songs. The first was a re-recording of the Supremes' previous hit "The Happening," retitled "Detroit is Happening." The new single was unaltered musically from the original, but drastically changed by the inclusion of a motivational voice-over from Detroit Tiger outfielder Willie Horton. On the record, Horton begins by informing the listener, "Man, if you live in Detroit, then you're living in the most uptight and out of sight swinging city in the whole country! And what ever you want to do this

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 218.

summer, from a job to a jam session, call 224-6440!"<sup>69</sup> Horton continued by listing even more summer programs and repeating the phone number. This record was followed up by the Miracles' "I Care about Detroit, penned by Smokey Robinson. Although the song does not directly mention the "Detroit is Happening" programs, its content affirmed the message of the campaign and made an appeal for unity. The song began with a monologue from Robinson, in which he asks the listener why they care about a city: "Is it friendly, warm, hospitable? And are there good job opportunities, educational facilities, and a cultural center? Are you proud to call it your hometown?" Robinson then answered his own remarks with, "When you come right down to it, I'd venture to say that you'd all agree to a resounding 'yes' when you are talking about Detroit, my hometown."<sup>70</sup> Following this verbal exchange, Robinson started to sing the song in earnest, which was typical of the saccharin and overly-produced numbers for which Motown became famous. Unlike the Supremes' "Detroit is Happening," "I Care about Detroit" was a wholly new composition with no basis in an earlier Motown hit. Motown distributed copies of both songs throughout Detroit during the summer of 1968 in order to promote the campaign, as well as civic unity.

The "Detroit is Happening" campaign was a success. The programs created 30,000 summer jobs, with 100,000 students enrolled in summer school and remedial education classes. Additionally, 50,000 inner city students participated in

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<sup>69</sup> The Supremes and Willie Horton "Detroit is Happening". Motown Records. 1968.

<sup>70</sup> Smokey Robinson and the Miracles "I Care about Detroit." Motown Records. 1968.

camping programs and cultural workshops.<sup>71</sup> More importantly for Mayor Cavanagh and the rest of the civic leadership, there was no repeat of the violence of the previous summer. In a speech summarizing the successes of the campaign, Cavanagh asserted, "'Detroit is Happening' proved...that Detroit is a good place to live and to work and to have fun. Many Detroiters had forgotten how the city was before July 23, 1967. 'Detroit is Happening' reminded them, and they, in turn, gave the city a chance to live again."<sup>72</sup> Motown was lauded by the organizers of 'Detroit is Happening' for its participation in the campaign, and the company was kept in mind for upcoming endeavors. In the final report on the campaign, the organizers proposed for future campaigns that "Motown Records and the radio industry should sponsor a city-wide band and vocal competition with a recording contract as the first prize."<sup>73</sup>

Even though the black community in Detroit was still reeling from the issues that caused the 1967 riot, Gordy continued to make his company as appealing as possible to the white civic elite. Although Gordy framed his tactics as a continuation of King's belief in non-violent actions in order to demonstrate the purity of his aims, the motives of Gordy were more in line with remaining inoffensive and inclusionary in order to maintain profitability. He would recall, "I saw Motown much like the world Dr. King was fighting for-with people of different races and religions, working

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<sup>71</sup> Smith. *Dancing in the Street*. 219.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 220.

<sup>73</sup> "Detroit is Happening Report: Summer 1968" box 428. Jerome P. Cavanagh Papers.

together harmoniously for a common goal.”<sup>74</sup> Gordy claimed to have compassion for those with more radical beliefs, “I respected all people who were fighting against bigotry and oppression. I knew there were many roads to freedom. And just because someone wasn’t on the same one as me did not mean they should be silenced.”<sup>75</sup> However, Gordy did silence those signed to Motown with different beliefs on Civil Rights. He refused to have his label affiliated with more radical Black Power movements and did not allow Motown artists to perform for concerts benefiting such causes. As evidenced by Motown’s full support behind the “Detroit is Happening” campaign, Gordy was more interested in promoting stability and the status quo rather than change achieved through more defiant means. Since Gordy was trying to court the mainstream white market, it only made sense he would play nice with its leaders.

Motown was ostensibly presented as a black company and proof that black entrepreneurialism and capitalism could be successful. However, while Motown’s performers and general staff were black, aside from Gordy and Robinson, all the executives and real decision makers were white. Barney Ales was the first white person hired by Gordy to work for Motown, and would become a major force. Prior to being hired by Motown in 1960, Ales worked as a representative for Capitol Records and Warner Bros. Records, as well as a partner in a Detroit distributorship.<sup>76</sup> It was Ales’ experience in record distribution that initially caught

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<sup>74</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved*. 249.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 248.

<sup>76</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 39.

Gordy's attention. Although Gordy had a firm grasp on developing talent and manufacturing records, Motown initially had trouble marketing and advertising its records. This difficulty was partially due to Gordy's own inexperience, he recalled: "our Sales Department at the time consisted of one guy-me-I knew I needed more help, somebody who could get to the broader market."<sup>77</sup> Outside of his own lack of familiarity, Gordy found most record distributors were white-owned and hesitant to have business dealings with a black businessperson. Furthermore, if a white distributor agreed to purchase Motown's records, Gordy found collections could be difficult to recoup since some white companies were purposefully delinquent or did not hold their debts to Motown as pressing needs in order to be settled since the label was black-owned.

Faced with this dilemma, Ales was a godsend. Abrasive and streetwise, Ales had a driving and forceful personality akin to Gordy's. The two also shared a love of competition and gambling, eventually becoming good friends.<sup>78</sup> However, since Ales was white, record distributors were more willing to do business with him. Sensing Ales' potential, Gordy let Ales distribute some of Motown's records in 1959. In addition, Ales began informally advising Gordy for Motown's billing the same year.<sup>79</sup> With the addition of Ales, Motown's success with distribution and collections rose. Bolstered by this success, Gordy offered Ales a job with Motown as vice-president in

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<sup>77</sup> Gordy, *To Be Loved*. 140.

<sup>78</sup> Ales once bragged that Gordy owed him 10,000 candy bars for losing at ping pong. Gordy refuted the claim, saying that Ales only one 3 out of ever 100 contests the two engaged in. George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 39.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid* 39.

charge of distribution. At first, Ales refused, believing his friendship with Gordy would prevent him from being objective as an executive. However, when Gordy pressed, Ales happily accepted since the Motown position paid him considerably more than his earlier jobs. LeBaron Taylor, a DJ at Detroit's WCHB radio station and friend of Ales recalled, "He was the most excited guy in the world. He said, 'Man, I'm making more money than I've ever made in my life.' He was making a hundred twenty-five dollars a week and they gave him a Cadillac."<sup>80</sup>

Once Ales was officially installed with Motown, the label's fortunes dramatically improved. Raymona Gordy Singleton, Gordy's wife at the time of Ales' hire, remembered his impact: "Barney orchestrated the participation of all the major white distributors nationwide, and in so doing set up all the machinery for us to repeat this success in the future....We had crossed over, and Barney Ales had been our navigator."<sup>81</sup> Without the inclusion of Ales in a prominent and visual role at Motown early in the label's existence, it is unlikely Gordy's aspirations for crossover and mainstream sales for his records would have come to fruition. Although Gordy could have conceivably had as much creative success with Motown, without Ales' presence, he never would have had the economic foundation necessary for the label's mainstream achievements.

As the 1960s went on, and Gordy became less directly engaged with the direction of Motown, it was Ales who took more control. Ales headed up Motown's

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid* 38.

<sup>81</sup> Singleton. *Berry, Me, and Motown*. 99.

sales force and became the business backbone of the company. When Gordy left Detroit for Hollywood, Ales was Gordy's primary individual left to manage the Detroit based acts. Ales' involvement with Motown culminated in his being named president of the label in 1975.<sup>82</sup> Although there was criticism of the appointment, since Ales replaced Ewart Abner, a black man, the move was initially hailed as a return to form for Motown, who hoped Ales' leadership would return Motown to prominence. Despite the high expectations, Ales was unable to fulfill his initial promise to make Motown "the number-one record company again," and was replaced in 1979 by Jay Lasker.<sup>83</sup>

Although Ales was the most prominent white member of Motown's staff, he was by no means the only white person on the label's payroll. Shortly after the label hired Ales, he brought aboard his attorney friend Ralph Seltzer to serve as special assistant to the president. In time Seltzer grew in authority and became Gordy's buffer from directly dealing with artists in an administrative capacity.<sup>84</sup> The Noveck brothers were other early white hires for the label. Sidney Noveck was an accountant who took charge of Motown's books while his brother Harold was a lawyer and legal consultant for the label.<sup>85</sup> Another white attorney, Ed Pollack, was brought in as an administrator.

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<sup>82</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 189.

<sup>83</sup> This was Ales' last formal connection to the label, and since leaving the company, has maintained an estranged relationship with Gordy. Posner. *Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power*. 288.

<sup>84</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 140.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 56.

Aside from an increasing presence in Motown's administration, white employees comprised all of Motown's sales and marketing force. Following the success of employing Ales to collect from distributors and getting Motown's records played on white radio stations, Motown allowed Ales to hire an all-white sales force. This first group was comprised of "Phil Jones, Al Klein, Irv Biegel, and Mel Da Kroob and later Tom Noonan."<sup>86</sup> Under Ales' direction, this group of salespeople promoted Motown's records to heights previously unobtainable by the one-man sales force of Gordy.

This influx of white persons in the management of an otherwise black company spurred rumors about Motown's true nature. An early rumor that began to circulate once Motown started to rise to national prominence was that Ales was the true owner of Motown and Gordy was just his front man, in order to make the label appear more legit as a purveyor of black artists. Gordy did not actively refute this rumor, believing this misbelief would help ensure white distributors paid the label, and was therefore ultimately good for business.<sup>87</sup> A later and more pervasive rumor was that Motown was connected with organized crime. The origin of this relationship changed with the telling. Some versions claimed Gordy was able to start Motown through a loan from the local Teamsters union, and the group had never left the label. Others claimed that Gordy's prolific gambling was at fault, and that he had lost control of the company to the mob during an illegal, high stakes poker

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<sup>86</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved*. 177.

<sup>87</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 39.



game. Ales was also a major figure in these rumors, since he was both white and Italian.<sup>88</sup> Motown's supposed affiliation with the mafia was a belief so prevalent that the FBI started to investigate the company and even called Gordy to their offices for an interview concerning possible mafia connections. Gordy suitably demonstrated the rumors had no basis in reality, and the interview culminated with the FBI agents asking for Gordy's autograph.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, the FBI's investigation never found proof that there was any truth to the rumors of Motown's mob connections. Once again, Gordy took the allegations in stride, seeing the positive benefits from such a mistaken belief. He would later claim, "You know, we got our money a little quicker from the distributors!"<sup>90</sup> Likewise, Ales had fun with the accusations; Gordy would recall Ales responding to questions about supposed mob connections with "Well, I *am* Italian, and I *am* from Detroit' he'd say with a deadpan expression-and then lean right into their face. 'You godda problem wid dat?'"<sup>91</sup> Despite the rumors, Gordy was able to keep Motown popular and relevant.

Unlike the rumors of Mafia ownership, there was no denying that white executives had increasing authority at Motown. As Gordy became more divorced from the day to day running of the label as the 1960s went on, it was white people who were appointed to run the operation in Detroit. Gordy's depositions for the Holland-Dozier-Holland suit exposed Motown's power hierarchy that was set up in

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 58.

<sup>89</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved.* 270.

<sup>90</sup> "Berry Gordy Q&A" Billboard. November 5, 1994. 84.

<sup>91</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved.* 270.

his absence. When questioned as to who was in charge of making decisions for Motown while he was in Detroit, Gordy replied, "There is Harry Balk, Ralph Seltzer, Barney Ales, and that is about it."<sup>92</sup> All three individuals named by Gordy were white. Despite Motown being a hallmark in the black community, Gordy chose to surround himself with white executives. A 1970 article in *Jet* magazine also demonstrated this dynamic in a list of the vice presidents of Motown: "four white-including Ales, Mike Roshkin, in charge of public relations; David Watts, financial; and John Mckuen, planning and operations-and four Blacks. The latter are Mrs. Esther Edwards, Gordy's sister who is senior vice president; William (Smokey) Robinson, with Gordy since Motown's inception; Robert Gordy, a brother, and Ewart Abner"<sup>93</sup> Of Motown's eight vice presidents, only Ewart Abner, the former president and part-owner of the defunct Vee-Jay Records, and Robinson were neither white nor an immediate member of Gordy's family.

Other record labels contemporary to Motown were not as criticized as Gordy was for the racial makeup of its management. However, those labels did not claim to represent the African American community like Motown did. Despite the low number of black persons in upper management, Motown still had more black executives than any other record label. Furthermore, it was not as though white persons totally overran Motown: in the late 1960s, of Motown's approximately 200 employees, only around 10 were white.<sup>94</sup> But their placement was disproportionately high-level. Motown's key accountants, vice presidents, and

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<sup>92</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 153.

<sup>93</sup> "Motown Grosses \$39 Million; Disc Firm to Remain in Detroit" *Jet*. December 3, 1970. 53.

<sup>94</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 154.

almost the entire sales force, were exclusively white. Although Gordy claimed the hires were based upon the most qualified applicants and those most likely to ensure Motown's success, it did little to quiet the growing discontent among those in the black community who believed Gordy had sold out to white interests.

Gordy was aware of this backlash and would often attempt to quell the criticism through public actions. For example, in 1967, Gordy went on the offensive against this sort of condemnation by appointing two black people to prominent positions within the company: Ewart Abner as director of Motown's International Talent Management, and Junius Griffin, the former director of publicity for the Southern Christian Leadership Council, to the same position at Motown. The hiring was announced in a three-page story in the November 2, 1967, issue of *Jet* in an article that detailed Motown's plans for expansion, as well as Gordy's commitment to the African American community. Gordy stated his desire for the growth of black capitalism with, "Make your own success work to help others achieve their measure of success, and hope they, in turn, will do likewise. This type of wonderful chain reaction would be music to my ears, and is indeed the credo of Motown." He also emphasized that Motown employees were content with the label and its direction, "we can only grow as fast and big as Motown employees will allow, and that is precisely the key to our success. Happy people work for us and that is the way it will always be as long as I am head of Motown."<sup>95</sup> For Gordy, Motown's continued growth was proof the employees of Motown were content with his direction, since unhappy employees would result in diminishing returns for the label.

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<sup>95</sup> "Motown Reveals Big Expansion" *Jet*. November 2, 1967. 60.

Gordy claimed to have his employees' happiness at the forefront of his mind and often cited the family nature of the company as proof of their contentment. He would later recall, "Motown was a family, right from the beginning- living together, playing together, making music together, eating together....I would always love every person who was a part of this story. They're all in my blood, and I in theirs. They cannot not love me; I cannot not love them."<sup>96</sup> This desire to keep Motown like a family manifested in its corporate culture, which initially had a strong family-like atmosphere. Gordy hoped to stave off criticism by his artists and employees by claiming they were all part of the same family, with him firmly set as the father. Gordy's appeals to family unity would continue even as Motown expanded and Gordy became less involved in its operation.

A large part of the familial image of Motown that Gordy hoped to convey was in its iconic Hitsville Studios. Located in a middle class African-American Detroit neighborhood at 2648 West Grand Boulevard, Gordy purchased the two-story house in 1959.<sup>97</sup> Drawing mainly upon his family's labor, Gordy transformed the property to suit the label's needs. A garage photo studio was remodeled into a recording studio, while the first floor served as lobby and control room along with Gordy's office in a downstairs bedroom. Gordy, his wife, and his children lived on the second floor. Additional upstairs bedrooms functioned as the accounting and marketing offices.<sup>98</sup> Even the outdoor lawn was used in service of the record label, acting as a

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<sup>96</sup> Gordy *To Be Loved*. 170.

<sup>97</sup> Benjaminson *The Story of Motown*. 21.

<sup>98</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved*. 120.

waiting room for the aspiring artists and producers who sought their opportunity to become famous through the label, “local kids would line the sidewalk and the front lawn, trying to get discovered or to get a glimpse of one of the stars...some succeeded, getting jobs as secretaries, office helpers, even janitors.”<sup>99</sup> Although most of the teens who loitered in front of Motown’s offices never had their dreams of stardom fulfilled by the label, enough did that the myth continued to perpetuate. Some of Motown’s biggest acts, most notably Diana Ross, were discovered through impromptu auditions that were given after hanging around the studios long enough. Even though it was just a house, Detroit’s black community viewed Motown’s Hitsville studios as a place that could turn dreams into reality for young black residents.

As Motown became more successful, Gordy expanded his company by buying houses surrounding the original Hitsville house, in time owning eight residences in the neighborhood. Each building housed an individual element of Motown’s production. According to Gordy, Ales described Motown’s compound as “the only high-rise that went sideways.”<sup>100</sup> The first additional house, purchased in 1961, housed Jobete Publishing. In 1962, Gordy followed this by purchasing a house to serve as offices for he and his sister Esther, as well as personal residence for Gordy, moving out of the second floor of the original Hitsville house. Once Gordy moved out of the second floor of the studio, Motown’s Artists & Repertoire moved in. A house for the finance department followed in 1965. 1966 was the most active year for

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* 152.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* 175.

Motown purchasing houses for offices, with four houses purchased: a three story home for Motown's Artist Development department, a house for International Talent Management, and two homes for administrative offices.<sup>101</sup> With the purchase of these houses, Motown's early office complex blurred the line between business place and neighborhood. Although Gordy, in time, would expand into more traditional corporate environments, the idyllic image of the residential Hitsville studio became synonymous with the public's view of Motown.

Motown's familial atmosphere was reinforced by the large number of Gordy's immediate family members working in high-level positions at the label. All of Gordy's seven siblings worked at Motown in some capacity during their lives, most as executives.<sup>102</sup> Even Gordy's elderly father, Berry Gordy, Sr. better known to all Motown staff and artists as 'Pops', was a well-dressed presence at the label, where he freely spent his time as an unofficial maintenance worker. Pops Gordy's presence was described as "he was always around, like a mascot...like he was watching over his seeds."<sup>103</sup> In addition, intermarriage was common among the Gordy family and Motown employees. Gordy's sister Anna married singer Marvin Gaye, his sister Gwen married producer Harvey Fuqua, and his sister Loucye wed Motown artist coordinator Ronald Wakefield.<sup>104</sup> This principle even continued with Gordy's own

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<sup>101</sup> Benjaminson. *Story of Motown*. 39.

<sup>102</sup> There was so much fluidity in terms of titles and actual authority for the Gordy siblings at Motown it would be convoluted to expand upon what exact jobs each member of the family held and for how long. That being said, in general, it was the female Gordy's that typically had more autonomy from Gordy and ultimately stayed with the company longest.

<https://www.motownmuseum.org/story/gordy-family/> Motown Museum Website.

<sup>103</sup> Benjaminson. *The Story of Motown*. 19.

<sup>104</sup> "Mrs. Loucye Wakefield, Motown Executive, Is Buried". *Jet*. August 12, 1965. 59.

children, his daughter Hazel married Jermaine Jackson of the Jackson 5 in a lavish 1973 ceremony.<sup>105</sup> With all of the Gordy's and Gordy's-in-laws working at Motown, it was not difficult for Gordy to expand the familial atmosphere to all employees of the label.

Gordy further cultivated Motown's domestic aura via other deliberate measures. Gordy forced his employees to sing a company song before every meeting. The song, written by Robinson, expressed the values Gordy hoped to instill in his employees: "Oh, we have a very swinging company/Working hard from day to day/Nowhere will you find more unity/Than at Hitsville, U.S.A...Our employees must be neat and clean/And really have something on the ball/Honesty is our only policy/Here at Hitsville, U.S.A."<sup>106</sup> Although the song was typical corporate boosterism, Gordy not only required all employees to sing along, he would typically single out a recalcitrant member of the staff to lead the collective body in the song. Gordy also encouraged competition between the staff members through contests and games, offering lavish prizes for the winners. Most notable were company football and baseball games, which typically resulted in numerous injuries, but generous prizes, such as cash and jewelry for the victors. Gordy also hired Lilly Hart, an older woman from the Grand Boulevard neighborhood, to prepare lunches served family-style in the Hitsville kitchen.<sup>107</sup> Although Motown was at its essence a

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<sup>105</sup> "Jermaine Jackson's Wife Changes His Life". *Jet*. December 20, 1973. 76.

<sup>106</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved*. 169.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*. 170.

money-making enterprise, Gordy tried his best to put on the façade that Motown was a family.

As a result, although Motown employees could be very competitive and at times mistrusting of each other, they were devoted to Gordy and held him in high regard. Even employees who left the company, because of contract disputes or feelings of being exploited by Gordy, typically did not criticize him directly. For instance, Brenda Holloway left the label after she felt she was under-promoted and not given the same opportunities as other artists. In her 1967 letter addressed to Gordy, she expands upon her grievances for paragraphs, yet closed with “I would like to say it has been a great experience being a little part of Motown, and even greater experience having worked for you....P.S. I will always *LOVE* Motown and you!”<sup>108</sup> Holloway was not unique in her perspective, as most former employees of the company regarded Gordy in high esteem, despite having a dim view of some of his business practices.

Although Gordy tried to keep the familial feel at the Hitsville complex on Grand Boulevard, as Motown expanded, it became more corporate and lost its feeling of closeness. Gordy initially moved the company’s administration from the Hitsville house to a ten story high-rise on Detroit’s Woodward Avenue in 1968 since it provided better security. However, the move was bemoaned by Motown employees, who found the building harsh and cold. According to songwriter Janie Bradford, “It took the intimacy out, because it was like a big 10-story building. We weren’t all over each other. It became phased, and everyone had their own office. It

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<sup>108</sup> George. *Where Did Our Love Go?* 156-157.



became big business. It just wasn't the same."<sup>109</sup> The move to Woodward Avenue was ultimately short-lived, since Gordy would relocate the company to Los Angeles in 1972, even further straining the familial atmosphere he had hoped to cultivate in Motown's corporate culture. Although Motown had been started as a black family business, as the company became more successful, Gordy bowed to outside corporate pressures. By making the label fit more within the expectation of corporate culture, it transformed Motown into an organization virtually indistinguishable from any other record label. In order to affirm Motown's uniqueness, and therefore set it apart from the competition, Gordy kept perpetuating the myth of Motown's family ambiance and the label's own past. However, in becoming so self-preserving, Motown lost its cultural relevance and in time became a shell of its former self. No longer was Motown the "Sound of Young America." By the 1970s and 80s, Motown was the sound of nostalgia. Still, with Motown's current artists not finding an audience in the later years, Gordy was content to put out reissue after reissue of older songs, since they were still financially viable.

Despite his foibles, Berry Gordy and Motown records have been hailed as a crowning achievement of black capitalism and held as evidence of capitalism's potency. He had seemingly lived out the American Dream, not only by turning a loan from his family into a multi-million dollar company, but by doing so through taking a bunch of young black kids from Detroit and turning them into household names.

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<sup>109</sup> Bill Dahl. *Motown: The Golden Years*. (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2011) 38.

By Gordy's own recollection after selling Motown to MCA in 1988, "from eight hundred dollars to sixty-one million. I had done it. I had won the poker game."<sup>110</sup>

Furthermore, Gordy had seemingly proved that black music and artists no longer could be marginalized in the eyes of popular music. This mythos is embodied in the biography introducing Gordy at his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988 that states that Gordy "insured that Motown's stable of singers, songwriters, producers and musicians took the concept of simple, catchy pop songs to a whole new level of sophistication and, thanks to the music's roots in gospel and blues, visceral intensity....After Motown, black popular music would never again be dismissed as a minority taste."<sup>111</sup> However, as evidenced by Gordy's actions to ensure Motown's music would reach as wide of an audience as possible, he reduced the level of "blackness" as to be inoffensive to a white listening audience. Although Motown's artists were clearly black, they were also 'neat and clean' and did not offend listeners' sensibilities in the otherwise turbulent 1960s. Indeed, Gordy seemed proud of this dynamic, "But in all the camps there seemed to be one constant-Motown music. They were all listening to it. Black and white. Militant and nonviolent. Antiwar demonstrators and the pro-war establishment."<sup>112</sup> Gordy's actions to expand Motown's consumer base not only ensured its relevance among the African-American community, it also provided a template later entrepreneurs could follow and be successful selling otherwise marginal music. Unlike Harry Pace

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<sup>110</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved*. 398.

<sup>111</sup> Berry Gordy Biography. [http://rockhall.com/inductees/berry\\_gordy\\_jr/bio/](http://rockhall.com/inductees/berry_gordy_jr/bio/)

<sup>112</sup> Gordy. *To Be Loved*. 242.

and Black Swan Records, Gordy's deliberate maneuvering of Motown to be appealing to a majority white audience was ultimately not only sustainable, but incredibly lucrative. Even though Motown eventually lost its place as the "Voice of Young America," it was still the sort of company later black entrepreneurs would try to emulate. As America transitioned from the 1960s into the 70s and 80s, Gordy's success with Motown not only showed how a black person could succeed in the music business purveying songs performed by black artists, but how that success would eventually force the company to lose its racial elements as an organization in order to sustain its own existence. Had Gordy not made the changes to Motown, it would have been unable to reach the national audience necessary to transform the label into the racial icon it became. Because of Gordy's success, a new generation of black record executives would try their hand at selling the same genres of music Motown had initially resisted, such as disco and funk. However, of all the genres Motown had not recorded, it was rap music that would ultimately prove the most lucrative.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DEF JAM, RUSSELL SIMMONS, AND HIP HOP: 1984-1999

The first meeting between Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin was marked by disbelief. Simmons could not fathom that the producer responsible for “It’s Yours,” one of his favorite rap songs, was a long-haired chubby Jewish college student. Likewise, Rubin was shocked by Simmons, who had a reputation as the manager of the biggest acts in the emerging Hip-Hop scene, but dressed very conservatively “in a sports jacket with elbow patches, and penny loafers.”<sup>1</sup> However, these first impressions were tossed away once the two men began to talk to each other. Despite coming from very different backgrounds, the two men connected over a love of music and their desire to take Hip-Hop further. This unlikely pair of a twenty-one year-old white rich kid from Long Island and a twenty-seven year-old black man from Queens would create Def Jam Records. In particular, Russell Simmons would be the individual who stayed with the label the longest and had the most influence not only on the running of the label, but in the spread of Hip-Hop from a regional genre into a national phenomenon.

Hip-Hop started as a regional variant of disco, begun in New York City during the mid-1970s. Although legends about its exact origins vary, a few concepts are consistent in all narratives. First, almost all are in agreement it came from the Bronx. The best evidence of an exact date for the origins of the genre is on August 13, 1973, when Cindy Campbell decided to throw a back to school party in order to raise money for school clothes. For entertainment, she asked her 16-year old brother Clive to play some records. Clive, better known as “Hercules” thanks to his

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<sup>1</sup> Leah Whisler. *Def Jam Recordings: The First 25 Years of the Last Great Record Label*. (New York: Rizzoli, 2011) 31.

muscular physique, agreed under the condition he would be able to play the music he liked. Cindy acquiesced, and flyers soon appeared around their apartment building and surrounding Bronx neighborhood inviting teens to a “DJ Kool Herc party.” The flyers also stated that the party would last from 9 pm to 4 am and cost 25 cents for the ladies and 50 cents for the “fellas.” The party’s set list was eccentric, primarily consisting of instrumental bits of Clive Campbell’s favorite songs strung together. Still, the party was a success, with over 300 in attendance, and DJ Kool Herc found himself in high demand for other parties.<sup>2</sup> As Herc’s notoriety spread, other DJs began to copy his style and concoct their own musical creations. In time, a vocalist was added to the performance, who would gather the audience’s attention by rhyming in rhythm over the songs. This style would eventually become known as rapping.<sup>3</sup>

Although Hip-Hop was growing in popularity in the Bronx and starting to spread to other boroughs and regions in the Northeast in the late 1970s, it was still primarily an underground phenomenon. DJs and rappers were starting to sell out clubs in New York City, but the nature of the performance seemed to lend itself to a live viewing. DJs were capable of putting on shows that lasted a few hours with no break in the music, and rappers were to work primarily through improvisation, neither of which was conducive to recording. Still, in 1979, Sylvia Robinson, a former studio musician, formed a record label called Sugar Hill Records, named for

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jun/13/dj-kool-herc-block-party>.

<sup>3</sup> According to Hip-Hop purists, there are four elements of Hip-Hop: DJing, rapping, graffiti, and breakdancing. However, adherence to four distinct elements is problematic since rapping (and to a lesser extent DJing) comes to dominate the others once the cultural was commoditized. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term “Hip-Hop” will be used to denote music, not the four-part cultural phenomenon.

the region in Harlem, with the aims of capitalizing on the craze with a recorded song. Unable to convince any of the popular rappers and DJs of the period to record for her, she compiled a group of her own design, and released a song under the name the "Sugar Hill Gang." She called the record "Rappers Delight," and it was released in September of 1979. The record was nearly fifteen minutes long and sampled the beat from Chic's "Good Times." Hip-Hop purists denounced the song, since the titular gang was a new creation made specifically for the record, and claimed fifteen minutes was not nearly enough time to convey the nuances of an actual live DJ show. Yet, in spite of these misgivings, the song was moderately successful, rising to #36 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. Although financial mismanagement plagued Sugar Hill Records, Robertson took the opportunity to dub herself "Queen of Hip-Hop" and hoped future records would be as successful. Although "Rapper's Delight" was the first rap record with national release, the second was Mercury Records' "Christmas Rappin'" a novelty holiday record that sampled the same beat from Chic's "Good Times." "Christmas Rappin'" was performed by Kurtis Blow, a rapper from Harlem who was managed by a young man from Queens he met while at New York's City College. This young manager from Queens would become the primary force behind rap's development and eventual rise to national prominence. Although "Christmas Rappin'" the first rap record made under the direction of Russell Simmons, it was far from the last, beginning a lengthy interplay with the genre.

Russell Simmons was born in Jamaica, Queens on October 4, 1957 to Daniel Sr. and Evelyn Simmons. Simmons' parents were both college-educated, having met

at Howard University, and held stable jobs. Daniel, Sr. was a schoolteacher and eventual attendance supervisor for Queens' District 29, while Evelyn worked as a recreation director for the New York City Department of Parks.<sup>4</sup> The couple had one child older than Simmons, Daniel Jr. (known as 'Danny'), and would eventually have a third son, Joseph.<sup>5</sup> Simmons' early childhood was idyllic: Jamaica was a safe region, and Simmons' parents were generous to their sons thanks to their occupations. Simmons also became fascinated with popular music from an early age, as evidenced by his brother's remembrance of Simmons religiously watching Elvis Presley movies on Saturday mornings as a child.<sup>6</sup>

In 1965, the family would move to Hollis, a middle-class neighborhood in the southeastern partition of Queens. Simmons would later recall that at the time of his family's moving into Hollis, the area was 10 percent white, but "[r]ight after we moved in that 10 percent disappeared."<sup>7</sup> Still, Hollis was deemed desirable by many black residents, who favored the neighborhood since land was inexpensive and allowed for the feeling of suburban life while still living within New York City. Furthermore, thanks to Daniel Sr.'s position within the school system, the Simmons' were able to ensure that their sons attended the best public schools throughout the system, which were more integrated than the neighborhood schools of Hollis. The first few years of the Simmons' family living in Hollis was uneventful, but as the

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<sup>4</sup> Russell Simmons. *Life and Def: Sex, Drugs, Money, and God*. (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2001) 12.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph would become better known as "Run" and make up one-third of Run-DMC.

<sup>6</sup> Stacy Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.: Russell Simmons, Rick Rubin, and the Extraordinary Story of the World's Most Influential Hip Hop Label*. (New York: One World Ballantine, 2005) 21.

<sup>7</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*. 14.

decade waned, heroin became prevalent. Danny would recall, “there was heroin all up and down Hollis avenue...every other kid was either on heroin or selling heroin, or both.”<sup>8</sup> Danny would fall victim to the drugs, eventually developing a \$50-a-day heroin habit. After their eldest starting stealing from Evelyn’s purse in order to fund his mainlining of heroin, the Simmons’ sent Danny to live with Evelyn’s mother in St. Albans, Queens.<sup>9</sup> Although Danny would eventually break his addiction, the impact drugs had on his older brother was enough to keep Russell away from drugs for most of his early teenaged years.

Simmons might have kept away from drugs because of their effects on the user, but he could not deny its lucrative nature. As he entered high school, Simmons decided to start selling drugs simply to make extra money. He would later recall, “This decision wasn’t made out of desperation or need. My family never missed a meal or came anywhere near being homeless....part of it was greed...I always liked nice clothes and used this dope money to buy them....so in my silly teenaged perspective, selling on 205<sup>th</sup> Street made sense.”<sup>10</sup> Simmons started small, primarily through the selling of nickel bags of marijuana, and even began using himself. Reckless in his selling, Simmons and a fellow dealer were once arrested for smoking joints and carrying several bags for distribution in front of a police precinct house. Still, the teenaged Simmons would justify the practice since it allowed him to purchase the things he desired, “things that in retrospect were ridiculous and

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<sup>8</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 21.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

<sup>10</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*, 17.



unnecessary. My goal at that point, and for much of my teen years, was simple-- to get into clubs where the fly kids hung out and to own fly clothes.”<sup>11</sup>

As Simmons’ career as a drug dealer progressed, he also became interested in the gang world. The Seven Immortals gang recruited Simmons to become a member in their Hollis division. Simmons would later recall the gang’s behaviors were not particularly terrifying, “our major activities were breaking into school dances or concerts....we would ride on the subway and intimidate people if we could. But we were really young and not that fearsome.”<sup>12</sup> Still, Simmons enjoyed gang life since it allowed him some protection as a drug dealer. However, Simmons’ career as a gang member was short-lived, quitting after the murder of a Seven Immortals member by a rival gang. The murder shook Simmons, who not only stopped being a member in the gang, but he also stopped selling illegal drugs.

Even though shaken, Simmons still felt the desire to purchase his own flashy clothes and other items. During his senior year, Simmons took his father’s advice and began working a legitimate job at an Orange Julius in Greenwich Village. Although Simmons appreciated the safety of the work, he grew bored of the monotony and quit within a few weeks of starting to seek new opportunities. What he found was coca leaf incense. Perfectly legal, Simmons learned that if the incense was chopped up and wrapped in aluminum foil, it acted and looked like cocaine. Simmons rationalized most people on the street could not afford real cocaine and would never know the difference, he recalled: “I had no problem selling fake cocaine

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

to whoever came along in Harlem or Greenwich Village. In fact, I lived high on the hog selling that stuff for two years.”<sup>13</sup>

Simmons believed he had found the perfect balance between lucrativeness and legality in selling fake cocaine, but still enrolled in college at his father’s urging. In 1975, Simmons began his studies at the Harlem branch of the City College of New York. Although Simmons initially commuted to the school from his parents’ house in Hollis, he found himself more attracted to life in Manhattan for two main reasons: drugs and music. At City College, Simmons was first exposed to angel dust, or PCP. Angel dust would become Simmons’ drug of choice for over a decade. Although theoretically at City College to study sociology, Simmons would spend most of his time at the school in the student lounge smoking pot and playing cards, before indulging in PCP.<sup>14</sup> Simmons also was attracted to the emerging new music scene and started to spend most of his nights at various nightclubs.

It was this love of music that would eventually dominate his life and career. In the student lounge, Simmons met Rudy Toppin, a fellow student who worked as a promoter at Charles’ Gallery on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, a nightclub that Simmons enjoyed. It was Toppin who first gave Simmons the moniker “Rush,” a reference to Simmons’ hurried speaking style and energy, as well as introduced Simmons to Hip-Hop. Simmons almost immediately felt drawn to the genre and began party promoting. He would recall “All the street entrepreneurship I’d learned selling herb, hawking fake cocaine, and staying out of jail, I decided to put into promoting music. It seemed

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 27

<sup>14</sup> Gueraseva, *Def Jam, Inc.* 23.

a lot less dangerous, more fun and more prestigious.”<sup>15</sup> Simmons joined with Toppin and began promoting Hip-Hop concerts. In time, the duo would be joined by aspiring party promoters, including Curtis Walker, who Simmons renamed “Kurtis Blow” thanks to Walker’s enjoyment of coca leaf incense.<sup>16</sup> Joined by others, the group would call themselves “The Force” and started promoting parties and concerts in Harlem at clubs like Small’s Paradise and Charles Gallery.<sup>17</sup> In time, the group expanded to other boroughs and became more successful. In particular, Kurtis Blow became fairly well known as a rapper thanks to his association with Grandmaster Flash. DJ Grandmaster Flash, along with his Furious Five MCs, was a pioneering DJ from the Bronx who took a shine to Blow, and performed on joint concerts in Queens.<sup>18</sup> As the collaborations between Blow and Flash grew in notoriety, so did Simmons’ attempts to book parties in larger and larger venues. Although in theory still a student at City College, planning and promoting events took most of Simmons’ time and energy. Simmons also brought his little brother Joseph into the world of rap music. Blow and Simmons hired 13-year old Joseph Simmons to spin records for Blow when Flash was unavailable. The younger Simmons was billed as “DJ Run his [Blows’] disco son,” referencing Joseph’s tendency to run his mouth. The moniker stuck, and Joseph Simmons kept the name Run throughout his rap career.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Simmons, Life and Def*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 40.

<sup>17</sup> *Gueraseva, Def Jam, Inc.* 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Simmons, Life and Def*, 43.

The event that cemented Simmons' decision to abandon finishing his degree and towards the music business was a concert held at the Hotel Diplomat in Times Square in 1977.<sup>20</sup> Simmons chose the hotel, which was an old and once elegant building on 43th Street, due to its proximity to two popular venues. The first was Xenon, which Simmons described as "the number two glam disco of the time, right behind Studio 54. Xenon was the place you went to do coke if you couldn't crash 54."<sup>21</sup> In addition, the Hotel Diplomat was across the street from Town Hall, a stage known for its folk and jazz performances. Simmons hoped the concert, featuring Kurtis Blow and Grandmaster Flash, would garner foot traffic from persons unable to get into the other two venues, but curious about rap music. The concert drew larger crowds than the hotel's ballroom was designed to handle. Over two thousand fans showed up for the concert, with many spilling over into the street.<sup>22</sup> The crowd was unruly and turned violent. Simmons recalled, "You had people getting robbed, mugged, stomped, trampled. Outside the Diplomat you had a clash between all these different groups of party people on the street and people desperately trying to get into the Diplomat."<sup>23</sup> The situation inside the hotel was not much safer, as Simmons spent the concert in the hotel's box office, since it had bullet-proof windows, in order to protect the profits.

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<sup>19</sup> Note: In order to prevent confusion between the two individuals, Joseph Simmons will be denoted as 'Run' or 'Joseph' to distinguish him from his brother Russell Simmons. *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Gueraseva *DefJam, Inc.* 24.

<sup>21</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Baulner "The Rap on Run-DMC: The Kids from Hollis Strike Gold" *New York Magazine*. November 17, 1986. 69

<sup>23</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*. 45.

Despite the security issues, the concert was lucrative and convinced Simmons to drop out of City College in his senior year, only a few credits shy of completing his sociology degree. The move greatly upset Simmons' father, who admonished his son. Simmons remembered, "Over and over he lectured me that the only way for a black man to make it was to get a degree and a job," but Simmons felt his entrepreneurial spirit would be ultimately more successful than finishing his education.<sup>24</sup> Following his departure from school, Simmons fully invested himself in his party planning business, which he called Rush Productions, in order to distinguish his solo venture from the parties he had promoted as part of a group at City College.

Simmons' tenure at Rush Productions caught a very early break thanks to journalist Robert Ford who wrote reviews and articles for *Billboard*, focusing primarily on the business side of disco. Ford followed the growing interest in rap music by New York youths and kept an eye on the genre as it developed. In particular, he noticed that many stickers promoting Hip-Hop shows shared the same logo: Rush Productions. One day in 1978 while riding the Q2 bus down Hollis Avenue, he noticed a young teenager putting the stickers up on the bus. Ford introduced himself to the young man and told the teen that he was interested in writing a story about party promoters for *Billboard*. The teen, Joseph Simmons, informed Ford that Rush Productions was his brother Russell's company. Ford gave Joseph a business card and asked him to have his brother call his office.<sup>25</sup> The next

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 36.

morning, Simmons called Ford and was quite hyper on the phone. Ford recalled, “He was a nervous wreck....Russell talked a mile a minute.”<sup>26</sup> They arranged to meet at Ford’s office the next morning. Simmons’ manic energy continued at their in-person meeting, yet, despite Simmons’ youth and inexperience, Ford was enchanted by the 21-year old’s enthusiasm. Ford would later describe Simmons at their first meeting as knowing “...everything there was to know about rap music and understood what work went in to make it happen. That level of passion is incredible and you have to respect that.”<sup>27</sup>

Ford decided to utilize Simmons’ knowledge of rap music for an article in *Billboard*’s May 5, 1978, issue. The article, entitled “Jive Talking N.Y. DJs Rapping Away in Black Discos,” ran on page 3 and briefly detailed the rise of rap music in popularity among black youths. In the article, Ford mentions four artists as best representing the genre: Eddie Cheeba, DJ Hollywood, DJ Starski, and Kurtis Blow. Although Ford wrote about Blow in favorable terms, mentioning how the artist was “now booked for weeks,” Ford’s article did not indicate Simmons in any capacity.<sup>28</sup> Still, Simmons’ presence is felt since Ford mentioned Blow as being at the same level as Cheeba and DJ Hollywood, although the two were much bigger draws than Blow at the time. It was likely Blow’s inclusion was due to Ford’s relationship with

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<sup>25</sup> Dan Charnas. *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*, (New York, NY: New American Library, 2010) 46.

<sup>26</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>28</sup> *Billboard*, “Jive Talking N.Y. DJs Rapping Away in Black Discos,” May 5, 1978. 3.

Simmons, with the younger man pestering for Blow's presence in the article to raise the artist's profile.

Ford's affiliation with Simmons did not end with the *Billboard* article. In the summer of 1979, Simmons successfully convinced Ford to assist him in making a Hip-Hop record with Kurtis Blow. Simmons wished to draw upon Ford's contacts in the record business to aid in making sure the record would be made. Although Ford was initially hesitant, Simmons' persistence wore him down. Ford would recall, "This was to be my first experience with Russell's unique gift for obsessive nagging....I chose Kurtis Blow not for Kurtis Blow, but for Russell--he was my ambassador to rap. He was the only guy who knew everybody in rap."<sup>29</sup> Now on board, Ford decided that the song should be a Christmas number, remembering the experience of a producer friend who had written holiday songs for Perry Como in the past and still received royalty checks. Ford also enlisted J.B. Moore, a co-worker at *Billboard*, in the project. Although Moore was a 37-year old white man, he wrote the lyrics to the song, "Christmas Rappin'," and sent them to Simmons and Blow for approval.<sup>30</sup> Simmons and Blow acquiesced to the lyrics, which they added with bits from Blow's standard routines and rhymes. The song was recorded at Soho's Greene Street Recording studio in October of 1979.<sup>31</sup>

Although Simmons had high hopes for the song, Ford's contacts in the record business were not panning out. Even with the success of "Rapper's Delight," record

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<sup>29</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 16.

<sup>30</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback.* 47-48

<sup>31</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 16.

companies were not convinced Hip-Hop was more than a regional fad. “Christmas Rappin’ “ being a holiday novelty record was not enough to offset the dim opinions regarding rap music. Simmons pressed on, giving out test prints of the record to DJs and club promoters. He also hoped to sway PolyGram records (home to many funk and R&B acts such as Kool & the Gang, the Gap Band, and Parliament) to pick up the song through facetious means, “to hype up PolyGram we placed fake orders for the record in the system by telling retailers and wholesalers to order the 12-inch through Polygram. PolyGram didn’t own it yet, but we created an appetite for “Christmas Rappin’” that led them to buy it.”<sup>32</sup> Despite Simmons’ efforts, it was not PolyGram itself who picked up the rights to “Christmas Rappin’ “ but rather Mercury Records, an English subsidiary of PolyGram that specialized in more traditionally white genres. The deal also gave Mercury the rights to have Blow record a second song should “Christmas Rappin’ “ prove successful.

The song was released in 1979 during the first week of December and was the first rap song released by a major label. Simmons first heard the song on the radio that Christmas Eve, and the experience was electric: “I ran downstairs. I told my father. I sat looking at the speakers. A record I made was on the radio. It was an unbelievable moment.”<sup>33</sup> Although the record was a seasonal novelty song, it sold respectably. The song sold 100,000 records before Christmas and rose to 300,000 total in the next year.<sup>34</sup> The success of the song also allowed Blow and Simmons to

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<sup>32</sup> Simmons. *Life and Def*. 53.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*. 54.

<sup>34</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 47-48



tour the country, as well as Europe. Simmons, who had only been on a plane once in his life as a child, was overwhelmed. He recalled, "Here we were, two students from City College, being flown to another country for Kurtis to perform a hit record. I felt rich. That shit felt amazing!"<sup>35</sup>

Thanks to the success of "Christmas Rappin'," Mercury exercised their option to have Blow record another song for the label. The follow-up song, "The Breaks," was an even bigger hit. Released in the summer of 1980, "The Breaks" would become the first rap record certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of America, with over 500,000 copies sold.<sup>36</sup> The song became so popular that on August 2, 1980, the borough of Queens declared "Kurtis Blow Day."<sup>37</sup> Additionally, Blow became more in demand as a performer, even opening for the pop group the Commodores during a national tour.

The success of Blow bolstered Simmons, who sought to add more acts in order to record more records. Over the next year and into 1982, Simmons grew Rush Productions and Rush Management. Acts such as Jimmy Spicer, Lovebug Starski and Orange Krush released songs for Simmons, but none of them had the same level of success as Blow. Simmons found middling success with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a duo whose gimmick was rapping in suits and ties. The duo had a successful record with 1981's "Genius Rap," which sold 150,000 units and was released on Profile Records, however, the success was not sustained in future

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<sup>35</sup> Simmons. *Life and Def*. 55.

<sup>36</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 50.

<sup>37</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc*. 18.

releases.<sup>38</sup> Simmons became frustrated with the lack of sales, placing the blame upon the repetitive musicality and reliance upon gimmicks. At the time, the majority of commercially popular Hip-Hop songs tended to follow the model set by Sugar Hill Records: sanitized remakes of popular disco songs. Furthermore, popular Sugar Hill artists such as Melle Mel and Grandmaster Flash dressed in a style that was flashy and heavily influenced by disco. Simmons felt the disco motif was not representative of the music actually heard in live rap concerts, nor in the attire worn by actual black youths. In Simmons' mind, the Hip-Hop that became popular lacked authenticity and he hoped to find an artist stripped of the disco aesthetic, that he could present as the true embodiment of rap.

Simmons did not even have to look outside his own family for such an artist to mold. After years performing as Kurtis Blow's "Disco Son: DJ Run," Simmons' younger brother had grown as a lyricist. In addition, he had coerced Darryl McDaniels, a school chum of Run's who used his initials DMC as a stage name, to perform alongside him at various concerts. The duo became a trio with the addition of another classmate from Hollis, Jason Mizell. Mizell served as the group's DJ and adopted the name of "Jam Master Jay." Since Run had aspirations of making it as a rapper, he pestered his brother, who already had experience with a successful artist in Blow, to allow he and his friends to record. Although initially hesitant, Simmons relented since his brother allowed him almost complete creative control over the

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<sup>38</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 76. In addition, Andre 'Dr. Jeckyll' Miller would become a close friend of Simmons and eventually a music executive in his own right. In time, he would even serve as president as Motown.

group. Simmons now had total control over the group's musicality, attire, and even name. Against the group's initial wishes, Simmons' named the trio Run-DMC.<sup>39</sup>

Not wanting to spend money on studio time or an unproven act, Simmons decided to record Run-DMC's first record in his parents' attic. Simmons brought along Larry Smith to serve as co-producer and audio engineer for the song. Smith had made the arrangements for Blow's earlier songs, so Simmons trusted his expertise. Over a simple beat generated by Smith on a drum machine, punctuated by a synthesizer, Run and DMC rapped a song titled "It's Like That."<sup>40</sup> In addition, Simmons took creative control on crafting the beat for the next song, which he titled "Krush-Groove 1." The song was eventually renamed "Sucker MCs" and made up the B-side of the group's initial demo. Simmons would later recall that co-producing "Sucker MCs" was "the single most creative thing I've ever done. The drum beat on that record is mine, and it's been bitten countless time since we laid it down. It was one of the first original b-boy break beats made for a rap record."<sup>41</sup> In the fall of 1982, Simmons took the demo to Profile Records, where he already had a good relationship through the records of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Profile, a small independent label, showed interest in Run-DMC and offered to sign the group for 10 percent of sales and a \$25,000 advance for a full album. Although Simmons had connections at Mercury Records via Blow, he decided Profile would be most advantageous for his brother. According to Simmons, "there was no major label

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<sup>39</sup> Gueraseva, *Def Jam, Inc.* 18.

<sup>40</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback.* 89.

<sup>41</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def,* 65.

supporting rap music...so we got the best deal we could. Profile was the best independent label at the time, which meant they might pay you a little bit instead of nothing at all.”<sup>42</sup> Run-DMC was also difficult to market. Radio stations that catered to black audiences outside of New York were hesitant to play “It’s Like That” or “Sucker MCs.” In order to generate interest, Simmons sent Run-DMC on a tour of the Southern states. Simmons had the group play free shows for radio stations in exchange for the stations adding the group to their roster. The strategy paid off, and “It’s Like That” eventually peaked at number fifteen on the Billboard Black singles charts.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, record sales increased, “It’s Like That”/”Sucker MCs” sold 250,000 copies within a year of its release.

Among those who heard the record was a junior at NYU named Rick Rubin. Rubin, who fancied himself a music aficionado, enjoyed “Sucker MCs” because he felt it captured the raw energy of a live Hip-Hop show better than the records which were more prevalent during the time.<sup>44</sup> Although primarily interested in punk rock, Rubin felt Hip-Hop had the same raw and gritty aesthetic that made rock music authentic. As a student at NYU, Rubin would regularly attend rap shows at various Manhattan night clubs, including the Roxy, where he struck up a relationship with Afrika Bambaataa’s DJ, Jazzy Jay. Jewish, heavyset, and long-haired, Rubin was an unlikely devotee of rap music and would ultimately greatly mold its future.

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 65.

<sup>43</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 98.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 134.

Frederick Jay Rubin was born on March 10, 1963, on Long Island to Mickey and Linda Rubin. The Rubins were wealthy and used their considerable means to spoil their only child. For instance, when Rubin demonstrated an interest in photography as a teenager, his parents not only bought him a camera, but also enrolled him in a summer course at Harvard on the subject. Likewise, when Rubin became interested in rock music and wanted to go to Manhattan venues like Max's Kansas City or CBGB's, his parents would not only drive him to the club, but also wait outside in their car for the concert to end.<sup>45</sup> Although Rubin had a comfortable upbringing in suburban Long Island, he longed to be in Manhattan. He would later recall that growing up in the suburbs provided "a filter on what I see and hear...which probably led to me having a more commercial taste."<sup>46</sup> For high school, he attended Long Beach High School, an integrated and economically diverse school on Long Island. It was here Rubin first learned of Hip-Hop from his black classmates. Although primarily interested in punk rock acts, he correlated the two genres in his mind, "Punk and rap groups made songs for the moment and then tossed them away...[for] something newer, better, and fresher. Both were created by near amateurs, for the sheer fun of it."<sup>47</sup> After graduation, Rubin had to decide between attending NYU or the University of Chicago.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, his parents were willing to pay his tuition and other expenses at either school, so the choice was ultimately

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 124.

<sup>46</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 6.

<sup>47</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback.* 125.

<sup>48</sup> Despite never diligently applying himself in his studies, Rubin made grades good enough to attend both prestigious schools through sheer intelligence.

left to Rubin. Although Rubin acknowledge the appeal of going far from his family and suburban roots, he ultimately decided to go to NYU because of the location. He would recall, “And my whole life, I’d wanted to live in Manhattan. I loved...going to shows, concerts, and museums. All the things that were intellectually stimulating were in the city and that’s where I wanted to be. I chose NYU.”<sup>49</sup>

At NYU, Rubin neglected his studies in favor of exploring his passions in Manhattan. Although punk rock was still Rubin’s primary interest, he also had two growing sub-interests: professional wrestling and Hip-Hop. Rubin would stay out until early in the morning attending wrestling events as well as Hip-Hop shows. Rubin’s dorm room at NYU’s Weinstein Hall would become a combination shrine and hoarder’s stash devoted to his hobbies. Rubin’s roommate, Adam Durbin, would later recall his first time entering into the room they were to share: “I noticed nothing in the room that let you know that there was any schoolwork to be done. No textbooks, notebooks, binders, loose-leafs. Nothing.”<sup>50</sup> In addition to listening to music, Rubin became interested in making music. During his freshman year at NYU, he started an art-rock band called Hose. In addition, he became friends with a quartet of punk rockers called The Young and The Useless, who were more interested in cutting up onstage than playing their instruments.

Rubin also drew upon his parents’ wealth to purchase recording equipment, making the dorm room a de facto studio as well. In his dorm studio, Rubin recorded primarily for Hose, but also for other students at NYU. Once Rubin decided to

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<sup>49</sup> Whisler. *Def Jam Recordings*. 20.

<sup>50</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 3.

release commercially the records made in his dorm room, he realized he needed a name. Although primarily interested in rock music, he drew inspiration from his growing interest in rap. He decided on Def Jam, a Hip-Hop phrase that meant “good song.” Rubin later recalled, “I thought of those words-- *def jam*-- as cool and cutting edge. There are disagreements on whether people were mispronouncing ‘death’ – meaning ‘It’s the end. It’s death!’ – or if it was short for ‘definitive.’ But *def* was a word that people used, and it seemed like a good name for a label.”<sup>51</sup> Rubin also managed to ink a distribution deal for Def Jam with the New York independent label 99 Records.<sup>52</sup> The first record released on Def Jam was an EP by Hose in April 1982. The album did not sell particularly well, but Rubin was more interested in making records he enjoyed than making money. It was in the fall of the same year when Rubin first heard “It’s Like That” and “Sucker MCs.” Rubin’s initial reaction to the record’s stripped production and more authentic sounding music was enthusiasm: “This is the real shit!” followed by defiance: “I could do this better.”<sup>53</sup> Rubin had decided to not only make a rap record, but to make what he believed would be the best rap record to date.

Rubin’s aspirations of making such a record might have been fruitless had it not been for some relationships he had developed in the Hip-Hop world. During his time visiting rap clubs, he had become friendly with not only DJ Jazzy Jay, but also with the Treacherous Three, a trio of MCs comprised of Kool Moe Dee, Special K, and

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<sup>51</sup> Whisler. *Def Jam Recordings* 20.

<sup>52</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 5.

<sup>53</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 134.

LA Sunshine. Rubin initially approached the trio about recording a song, but they refused. The group had an exclusive contract with Sugar Hill Records and therefore could not record on Rubin's personal label.<sup>54</sup> Undeterred, Rubin pressed the group further. Finally, Special K suggested Rubin talk to his older brother, who was working at a pharmacy at the time, but had previously rapped under moniker T La Rock. Rubin and T La Rock met, hit it off, and Rock agreed to record a song with the still-teenaged Rubin. Now having an MC, Rubin then approached Jazzy Jay to serve as DJ on the record, who similarly agreed. With a team now in place, Rubin borrowed a Roland TR-808 drum machine from Adam Horovitz, a friend of Rubin's from the band The Young and The Useless, and set up his dorm-room studio to a record a rap song.

The resulting song was entitled "It's Yours" and was released on Streetwise Records in late 1983.<sup>55</sup> Rubin was paid \$2,000 for the track by Streetwise and given the branding rights for the song, which allowed the logo for Def Jam to be featured prominently on the record sleeve. Rubin was pleased that he would be able to give his pet label exposure through the success of the record, but was initially frustrated by stagnant sales. Rubin vented about this frustration to a friend, Tuff City Records founder Aaron Fuchs, who suggested Rubin seek out Russell Simmons, since Fuchs reasoned "no one promotes rap records better."<sup>56</sup> Rubin was aware of Simmons

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 134.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 135.

<sup>56</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 30.



through his work with Run-DMC, Kurtis Blow, and other Rush Management acts, and figured meeting with the older man would be useful to help his record sales.

While Rubin was deciding to meet with Simmons, Simmons was already impressed by “It’s Yours.” Simmons loved the song’s “big, huge beats, minimal melody and aggressive vocals.”<sup>57</sup> Although the Rush Management brand had grown to include artists such as the rap bands Orange Krush and Whodini, in addition to established acts like Blow and Run-DMC, Simmons was still on the hunt for intriguing new sounds. He was so enthralled by “It’s Yours,” he sought to meet this new producer and utilize his services for his own artists.

Simmons finally met Rubin in June of 1984 at a party held at the Danceteria nightclub honoring the premiere of *Graffiti Rock*, a syndicated Hip-Hop sketch show.<sup>58</sup> Jazzy Jay, who not only knew both men, but also knew they wanted to meet each other, facilitated their meeting. Despite the interest in each other’s abilities, their first meeting was initially marked by disbelief. Simmons could not fathom that the producer responsible for one of his favorite songs was white. Simmons exclaimed upon realizing that Rubin was indeed the one responsible for “It’s Yours”: “I can’t believe you made that record and you’re white! Cause that’s the blackest record that’s ever been!”<sup>59</sup> Rubin recalled being similarly underwhelmed by Simmons at first: “Russell was dressed like a substitute teacher, in a sports jacket with elbow patches, and penny loafers. Drinking screwdrivers.”<sup>60</sup> But in time, Rubin

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<sup>57</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*. 78.

<sup>58</sup> Whisler. *Def Jam Recordings*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 33.

similarly warmed up to him, “I remember he was really funny and fun to talk to. Full of energy, I really liked him.”<sup>61</sup> Despite coming from very different backgrounds, the two men connected over a love of music and their desire to take Hip-hop further. Simmons would later recall of their friendship, “We both hated the soft-ass black music that was on the radio; we both enjoyed the rebel attitude that hip-hop embodied; we both saw that there was more in common between AC/DC and rappers than between rappers and Luther Vandross.”<sup>62</sup> Although an unlikely pairing, their friendship developed into a musical and business relationship, as Simmons later stated: “We made a good team-- I was a manager/producer type, and Rick made beats and understood the attitude.”<sup>63</sup>

Splitting time between Rush Management’s offices on Broadway and 26<sup>th</sup> Street and Def Jam’s home in Rubin’s dorm-room at NYU, the duo started making their first moves together. With the release of “It’s Yours” containing the address of Rubin’s dorm room as Def Jam’s offices, they found themselves deluged by demos by rappers wanting to be signed. Most went ignored without being heard by either man, but Rubin’s roommate and friend Adam Horovitz took the time to listen to every demo. One recording in particular appealed to Horovitz, and he passed it along to Rubin. The demo was by a sixteen-year-old from St. Albans, Queens named James Todd Smith, who gave himself the moniker “LL Cool J,” short for ‘Ladies Love

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<sup>60</sup> Whisler. *Def Jam Recordings*, 31.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

<sup>62</sup> Simmons. *Life and Def*, 78.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 78.

Cool James.’<sup>64</sup> Rubin felt Smith had great potential as a rapper, due to his impressive vocabulary and witty rhymes, but needed polish in order to be a success. Rubin later recalled of Smith’s initial demo: “I can’t say it was great...but it was different, and I liked it. There was something about it that just struck us as funny, and we wanted to hear it over and over again.”<sup>65</sup> Impressed, Rubin called Smith’s house in order to arrange a meeting. Even though Smith was not at home at the time of the initial call, he would remember the exhilaration of the moment of telephoning Rubin: “Rick was like, ‘Yo, this is Rick. Come on down. Let’s make a demo.’ I said ‘Word? Oh, man!’ People take pills to feel like that!”<sup>66</sup> Smith journeyed to NYU to meet with Rubin and reacted to Rubin’s race as Simmons had. Smith recalled: “When Rick came downstairs, the first thing I said was, ‘Yo, you Rick?’ He said, ‘Yeah.’ I said, ‘I thought you was black.’ He said, ‘Cool.’”<sup>67</sup> However, once Smith began to talk to Rubin, he realized the heavy-set bearded Jewish college student was legitimate. Seeing the raw talent in Smith, Rubin played a few beats programmed in the drum-machine, to which Smith responded by creating rhymes. Within a few hours, the duo had recorded a demo of a new song, which they titled “I Need a Beat.”

Having a new song he was sure to be a success, Rubin approached Simmons to officially become partners at Def Jam in order to finance the release of “I Need a Beat.” Although Simmons agreed the record would be a hit, he initially responded by advising Rubin to release the song on Profile, with whom he had a relationship

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<sup>64</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback* 138.

<sup>65</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc* 38.

<sup>66</sup> Whisler. *Def Jam Recordings*. 61.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 61.

through Rush Management artists. Rubin was insistent: “All you’ve done since we’ve been friends is complain to me about Profile-- you hate ‘em, you don’t trust ‘em, you have to do all the work because they steal from you, they don’t pay you. Why would we give it to them?”<sup>68</sup> Rubin’s words rang true for Simmons. He had produced several records for Run-DMC and other Rush artists for other record labels and had little to show for it financially. Still, Simmons believed starting his own record label would interfere with his ultimate goal of having an imprint at one of the large record companies. Indeed, at the time of Rubin’s plea to Simmons, he was already in talks with A&R representative Steve Ralbovsky at EMI Records for an imprint to be called Rush Records.<sup>69</sup> Simmons feared starting his own label, no matter how small, would hamper the impending deal, but Rubin was insistent. He recalled telling Simmons, “This won’t get in the way of that. This is separate. Let’s do a little independent company. I’ll make all the records. I’ll do all the work. I’ll do everything. You just be my partner.”<sup>70</sup> While Rubin planned to do all the initial work, he hoped early success would cause Simmons to become more engaged at Def Jam and utilize his prolific skill at marketing and communication to ensure the label’s long-term survival. Simmons viewed Rubin as an incredible producer and beat maker, who had a sure-fire hit in “I Need a Beat.” Even though Simmons felt true financial sustainability would come through a distribution deal with a large record company, he hoped the success of “I Need a Beat” and any future records might leverage an even better deal

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 61.

<sup>69</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback* 139.

<sup>70</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings.* 61.

with a major label. Because of this future hope, Simmons agreed to become partners with Rubin at Def Jam Records.

In the summer of 1984, Simmons asked his lawyer Paul Schindler to draw up an agreement that made Rubin and Simmons equal partners at Def Jam Records. Both men were quite young to be entering into such a partnership, with Simmons at 26 and Rubin, technically still a full-time college student at 21 years of age. The initial capital of the new label was \$6000 total, with \$1000 provided by Simmons. Rubin's parents gave the other \$5000, under the requirement that if the company was not successful, Rubin would go to law school.<sup>71</sup> In addition, Simmons agreed to manage any acts signed to the label. This entailed not only booking their gigs, but also generating publicity and shaping their public persona. Although Simmons had a full slate of artists to manage on Rush Management who were signed to different labels, he felt able to divide his time to still fulfill his responsibilities to both Def Jam and Rush.

Simmons' ability to balance between Def Jam and Rush artists was demonstrated in the same summer of 1984. Simmons partnered with Ricky Walker, another rap promoter, to launch the Fresh Fest tour. The tour was the first of its kind, containing all rap and Hip-Hop acts. In addition, the tour was sponsored by the Swatch Watch Company and marked the first time a major company directly sponsored the burgeoning Hip-Hop culture.<sup>72</sup> Through December of 1984, the Fresh Fest tour crossed the United States, selling out ten to twenty-thousand-seat arenas

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<sup>71</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback* 139.=

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 115.

at each performance. The tour was also a financial boon to Simmons. In addition to headliners Run-DMC and Kurtis Blow, the tour also contained other Rush Management artists like Whodini and Newcleus, along with several break-dancing teams. The only non-Rush Management Hip-hop group on the tour was the Fat Boys. The group, which was growing in popularity, signed Kurtis Blow as their producer. So although Simmons did not technically represent the Fat Boys, he did represent Blow and was able to get a cut of their profits as well. Simmons would later recall the amount of money his acts earned per performance, recalling Walker “booked Run-DMC to headline the tour for \$5,000 a night. Whodini, Kurtis Blow, and the Fat Boys got \$3,500 per show. I managed all the acts [except the Fat Boys]....So Rush Management was commissioning about \$1,200 or something a show. I thought I was rich.”<sup>73</sup> After fifteen weeks and eighty performances in fifty cities, the tour ended in the winter of 1984. Not only was the tour lucrative, earning \$3.5 million, but it also demonstrated rap had a future outside New York.<sup>74</sup> In addition, the tour showed that Hip-Hop had crossover appeal, since white fans purchased a significant portion of the tickets. This percentage was highest in Providence, Rhode Island, where over half the tickets in the area were bought by white teenagers.<sup>75</sup>

The Fresh Fest tour was significant for Simmons’ future for two reasons. The first was that he met Lyor Cohen during the tour’s stop in Los Angeles. Run-DMC was booked for a separate showcase at the Mix Club, a venue housed in the former

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<sup>73</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def.* 69.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 69.

<sup>75</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback* 116.

Stardust Ballroom. The show, which mainly featured the punk rock bands Fear, Social Distortion, Circle Jerks, and Fishbone, included Run-DMC due to Cohen's insistence.<sup>76</sup> The Israeli-born Cohen, who managed the Mix Club part-time, believed Run-DMC embodied the same rebellious spirit as punk rock and thought their inclusion would increase ticket sales. Cohen's gamble paid off, and the show earned him \$35,000 in a single night.<sup>77</sup> That same night, Simmons, impressed by Cohen and high on angel dust, offered Cohen a job with Rush Management. Cohen accepted and flew to New York. Once Cohen arrived at Rush Management's office, he found a very quiet reception, since Simmons did not remember offering Cohen the job during his inebriated state.<sup>78</sup> Undeterred, Cohen was offered a chance to prove his worth by serving as road manager on Run-DMC's European tour, which was to begin almost immediately following the conclusion of the Fresh Fest tour. Although Simmons did not initially recall offering Cohen a job, his diligence impressed Simmons greatly. In time, Cohen would ultimately rise in authority at both Rush and Def Jam, second only to Simmons.

The other major development for Simmons that occurred thanks to the Fresh Fest tour was an article in the *Wall Street Journal* on December 4, 1984. The article, written by Meg Cox and given the unfortunate title of "If A Big Beat Zaps You Out Of A Nap, The Music Is Rap," details the success of the Fresh Fest tour throughout the country.<sup>79</sup> Cox's article highlights Run-DMC and Kurtis Blow as very financially

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<sup>76</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 31.

<sup>77</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback.* 155.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 156.

lucrative before pointing out the involvement of Simmons. Although the entire article is very complimentary of Simmons, there is a single phrase that he took to heart. In summation of Simmons' achievements, Cox stated: "Mr. Simmons, 26, now represents 17 artists and is known as the mogul of rap."<sup>80</sup> Simmons never before had been labeled as the "mogul of rap," but he enjoyed the title and relished the attention. He would recall the irony of the phrase "mogul of rap": "Funniest thing. Rap wasn't shit, but I was the mogul anyway."<sup>81</sup> The *Journal* article definitely raised his public profile and aided in getting financing for Def Jam and Rush Management projects.

With Simmons on the Fresh Fest tour, Rubin spent the latter part of 1984 setting up Def Jam's initial staff. Def Jam's earliest office staff was Rubin's college friends Adam Dubin and George Drakoulis.<sup>82</sup> The duo primarily answered phones and ran errands for the new label, but also made deliveries to distributors. Since Rubin did not have enough money to pay Dubin and Drakoulis a regular salary, they were instead compensated through receiving college credit from NYU, which counted their work for the label as an internship. Rubin also drew greatly upon Simmons' staff at Rush Management, primarily Lyor Cohen, to aid with Def Jam's books and accounting.

In November of 1984, LL Cool J's "I Need a Beat" was the first single released by the new record label. As Simmons and Rubin both predicted, it was a huge hit,

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<sup>79</sup> Meg Cox, "If A Big Beat Zaps You Out Of A Nap, The Music Is Rap" *Wall Street Journal*. December 4, 1984.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Simmons *Life and Def*. 99.

<sup>82</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 41.



selling 100,000 copies by the end of the year.<sup>83</sup> The song also was critically well received. The November 30<sup>th</sup> issue of *Dance Music Report* favorably reviewed the song, calling it: “hardcore rap at its most insistent. Featuring a relentless drum pattern, various scratch effects, and an unusually well-enunciated, highly percussive vocal, this is a product that should immediately appeal to its target audience,” before surmising the record would be “a guaranteed retail mover.”<sup>84</sup> The December 21<sup>st</sup> issue of *Black Radio Exclusive* held a similar view, saying the record was “Reminiscent of the Run-DMC style, this 16 year old whiz can rhyme and rap with the best of them as is [*sic*] forceably demonstrated on this debut release.”<sup>85</sup>

With the initial success of LL Cool J, Simmons and Rubin both sought to find more artists to fill out the label’s roster. Rubin was first to sign another act. He had already been friends with the members of the punk rock band The Young and The Useless for several years and had been roommates with member Adam Horovitz in the past. Thanks to Simmons’ and Rubin’s urging, the band, which also included Adam Yauch and Michael Diamond, ditched their instruments and switched genres to Hip-Hop. The group’s switch to rap music also necessitated a name change for the band, which now called themselves the Beastie Boys. Simmons also scouted new acts for the label to sign, including Jimmy Spicer, MCA and Burzootie, and Original

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<sup>83</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 140.

<sup>84</sup> *Dance Music Report*. November 30. 1984.  
<http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/defjam/exhibition/ineedabeat/index.html>.

<sup>85</sup> *Black Radio Exclusive*. December 21, 1984.  
<http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/defjam/exhibition/ineedabeat/index.html>.

Concept.<sup>86</sup> With several artists recording new material in Def Jam's dorm room studio, Def Jam's founders hoped the upcoming year of 1985 would continue the success found with "I Need a Beat."

The second single released by Def Jam came in the last of week of December 1984 and featured the Beastie Boys. Entitled "Rock Hard," the track featured the trio rapping over AC/DC's "Back in Black." Although Rubin, who produced the record, hoped the song would appeal to both black Hip-Hop fans and white rock aficionados, the resulting track was a messy amalgamation of both styles. Unlike "I Need a Beat," which had a very clean production, "Rock Hard" was muddled and difficult to hear the Beasties rapping over the song. Critics had a mixed response to the record. The most damning criticism came from Andy Dunkley, a reviewer for the *Rockpool Newsletter*, whose entire review of the record was "Plod, plod, plod, plod, plod, fast electro drum-break, plod, plod, plod, plod. Echhhhh!!!!"<sup>87</sup> A more positive review came from the *CMJ New Music Report*, which stated that the Beasties had "now manifested themselves into the first *legitimate* rap group of Caucasoid origin."<sup>88</sup> Although the record sold respectably, it was nowhere near the success of "I Need a Beat." Subsequent Def Jam releases by Jazzy Jay and MCA and Burzootie were similarly unsuccessful. It was only when LL Cool J's follow-up "I Want You" was released in February of 1985 that Def Jam had a second hit on par with "I Need a Beat."

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<sup>86</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 299.

<sup>87</sup> Andy Dunkley, *Rockpool Newsletter*. January 21, 1985.  
<http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/defjam/exhibition/rockhard/index.html>.

<sup>88</sup> *CMJ New Music Report*. February 8, 1985.  
<http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/defjam/exhibition/rockhard/index.html>.

While Rubin was producing songs for Def Jam's artists, Simmons was focused upon getting Def Jam a distribution deal with a major label. Although Simmons was able to get meetings with major companies, he was unsuccessful in winning over executives in order to secure a deal. Simmons would later recall his and Rubin's response to one particularly disastrous meeting with Warner Brothers, "So we put on LL Cool J's 'I Need a Beat.' The whole room sat there-- some of them at the speakers, some of them just looking at their hands. It was like they were hearing music from another planet....Rick and I just laughed about it."<sup>89</sup> Despite the growing popularity of rap music and managing a bono fide superstar group in Run-DMC, Simmons was unable to parley that experience into the distribution deal he desired from Def Jam's onset.

However, Def Jam was eventually able to get nationwide exposure, ultimately resulting in a distribution deal with Columbia Records, thanks to an improbable series of events. Although Warner Brothers passed on signing Def Jam to a distribution deal, Warner Bothers Music chief Mo Austin passed word along to the Warner Brothers Pictures president Mark Canton, that the label, and especially Simmons, might be worth a look for a film project. Canton, who had previously found success in producing *Purple Rain*, believed that money could be made in making films starring Run-DMC. Canton approached Simmons about making such a film, only to be surprised to learn that Simmons not only was interested in such a project, he already had a script. In the months before the Warner Brothers meeting, Simmons had become friends with Michael Shultz, a black producer and the director

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<sup>89</sup> Simmons. *Life and Def*. 84.

of the Richard Pryor films *Car Wash* (1976) and *Which Way Is Up* (1977), as well as *Cooley High* (1975) which was a favorite of Simmons.<sup>90</sup> Although Simmons initially pitched Shultz an account of Run-DMC's rise in the New York rap scene, Shultz encouraged Simmons to look in a different direction. The two decided instead to make a fictionalized version of Def Jam's creation with the relationship between Rubin and Simmons at the heart of the film's plot. Rubin and Simmons agreed and both hoped it would raise the company's profile.

The subsequent movie, *Krush Groove* (1985), crossed the boundaries between fantasy and reality. The film's plot was about the travails of two entrepreneurs as they start up a rap record label from a dorm room. As they sign a slate of acts, including Run-DMC, Kurtis Blow, the Fat Boys, and LL Cool J, the founders fruitlessly search for funding for the label's expansion. Unable to find legitimate sources of revenue, the founders instead turn to borrowing money from gangsters. Primarily told through vignettes in between rap performances, the plot was virtually non-existent in the resulting film. However, the minimalist story of *Krush Groove* was incredibly close to the actual founding of Def Jam Records. Further muddling the separation between art and life was that virtually every character in the film was portrayed by their real-life analog. The rap artists who acted in the film used their same stage names and performed the same songs as they did in reality. Rick Rubin played 'Rick', a Jewish student at NYU who starts the titular record label in his dorm room. The only person who did not play himself in the movie was Simmons, who instead was replaced by Blair Underwood, who portrayed Russell

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<sup>90</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 146.

Walker, the economically driven and out-spoken co-founder of Krush Groove Records, whose brother is Run of Run-DMC. Although Simmons was initially picked to play the role, producers wanted more of a leading-man type to portray the part.<sup>91</sup> Simmons was not resentful for the substitution, since he was not comfortable with acting in such a large role, and the fact that “...Blair Underwood played me was certainly helpful in getting my picture in the black teen magazine *Right On!* The movie got me laid.”<sup>92</sup> Simmons did ultimately have a part in the film, playing Crockett, an unscrupulous gangster who loans Russell Walker and Rick money for the label.

*Krush Groove* was released in the fall of 1985 and generally panned by critics. For example, in her October 25<sup>th</sup> review of the film for the *New York Times*, critic Janet Maslin praised the rap performances, but critiqued the film’s editing and plotline: “Unfortunately, the skimpy screenplay by Ralph Farquhar insists upon entangling the performers in the most conventional subplots imaginable. Talent contests, feeble attempts at romance and the travails of a struggling young record company are all enlisted, however briefly, in the effort to drum up backstage activities for the players, who are best watched in performance anyhow.”<sup>93</sup> Maslin concluded: “Rap music is infinitely more original than these creaky devices, and it deserves something better.”<sup>94</sup> Lynn Van Matre of the *Chicago Tribune* felt similar to

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* 148-149.

<sup>92</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*, 100.

<sup>93</sup> Janet Maslin. “Krush Groove” (1985). *New York Times*. October 25, 1985.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9901E7DB1638F936A15753C1A963948260>

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

Maslin. In her review of the film, also published on October 25<sup>th</sup> of 1985, she called *Krush Groove* a “harmless but predictable and pedestrian excursion into the world of streetwise rap bands hoping for a big break.”<sup>95</sup> Van Matre also complimented the musical performances of Run-DMC and other acts, but summarized: “A perennial problem with music-oriented movies is that the excitement of a live performance so seldom translates successfully to the screen, and rap is no exception. There are plenty of big names involved in *Krush Groove*, but the music alone isn’t able to carry the film, and the plot certainly can’t.”<sup>96</sup>

Despite the misgivings of critics, *Krush Groove* was a financial success for both Warner Brothers and Def Jam. The film premiered at 515 theaters across America and grossed \$3 million during its opening weekend.<sup>97</sup> *Krush Groove* would ultimately make \$11 million at the box office, more than three times its budget.<sup>98</sup> Simmons, Rubin, and their artists were compensated for the movie, as Simmons would later recall: “So to be involved in *Krush Groove* I was paid \$15,000. Rick Rubin got \$15,000....Run-DMC jointly got \$15,000.”<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, the film’s soundtrack, which heavily featured the same artists in the actual movie, was a success for Warner Brothers, peaking at #79 on the pop chart and #14 on the R&B chart.

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<sup>95</sup> Lynn Van Matre, “Good Rap, Bad Rap: Music Tops Plot In ‘Krush Groove’” *Chicago Tribune*. October 25, 1985. [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-10-25/entertainment/8503130289\\_1\\_run-dmc-bad-rap-rap-music](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-10-25/entertainment/8503130289_1_run-dmc-bad-rap-rap-music).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 152-153.

<sup>98</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 68.

<sup>99</sup> Simmons. *Life and Def*. 99.

Despite *Krush Groove*'s success, it was not without controversy because fights erupted in some theaters during screenings of the film. The worst violence was centered in New York City. For instance, police reported that one melee in Nassau County involved as many as 225 teenagers.<sup>100</sup> Another fight in Elmont, Long Island resulted in Scott Lund, a seventeen-year-old being thrown through a plate-glass window and receiving more than 200 stitches as a result.<sup>101</sup> In order to combat the association between Def Jam and Rush Management acts with violence, Simmons sent Andre Harrell, who had now transitioned from being a performer with Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde into an executive with Rush Management, to speak in defense of the film. Harrell joined with the Reverend Al Sharpton at a publicity event outside the RKO-Warner Theatre on Broadway designed by Simmons to promote the film as well as uphold its merits.<sup>102</sup> The effort to separate *Krush Groove* from the teenaged violence was successful to an extent, but the association of Def Jam and Rush artists with riots and mayhem would only grow as time went on.

At the same time *Krush Groove* was being filmed, Simmons made another move that elevated Def Jam's awareness among the public consciousness. During the same trip to Los Angeles as the disastrous Warner Brothers meeting, Simmons received a call from Freddy DeMann, Madonna's manager. DeMann was under the mistaken impression that Simmons managed the Fat Boys, and he wanted the trio to open for Madonna during her "Like a Virgin" tour, which was to occur from April

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<sup>100</sup> Clifford May. 'On L.I. Fights Follow a Film on Rap Music' *New York Times*. November 6, 1985. <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/06/nyregion/on-li-fights-follow-a-film-on-rap-music.html>.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 68.

through June 1985. Although Simmons did not manage the Fat Boys, he pretended he did, and said they were too busy to perform on the tour.<sup>103</sup> DeMann pressed on, inquiring about Run-DMC's availability. Simmons rebuffed the offer, stating that after headlining the Fresh Fest Tour, the group was too high profile to open for another act. Simmons then countered DeMann and suggested the Beastie Boys. The group had previously shared the bill with Madonna at CBGB's two years prior and were already acquainted with the singer through hanging out at the Funhouse and other Manhattan clubs. DeMann agreed and the Beastie Boys were sent out on tour at the rate of \$500 a night. The tour was a huge boon to Def Jam and Simmons' business prospects. Although the Fresh Fest tour had been large, it was still small in comparison to the audience size and money brought in by a pop singer such as Madonna. Simmons hoped the tour's exposure would endear the Beastie Boys to a larger mainstream audience.

However, the Beastie's antics were not well received by either audiences or critics. Despite the criticism, the group was not asked to leave the tour because Madonna was amused by their antics. Horovitz recalled, "Madonna's manager wanted us gone, but Madonna herself saw the humor in it and how it worked to her benefit....I personally feel we owe so much to Madonna...It [the tour] gave us so much experience and confidence."<sup>104</sup> As the tour progressed, audiences warmed up to the Beastie Boys' unconventional performances and brand of humor. By the tour's final stop in New York City's Madison Square Garden, where the Beasties soaked

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* 50-51.

<sup>104</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings.* 80, 88.



Madonna with water guns in lieu of an encore, the group had grown considerably in popularity and garnered a great deal of exposure for Simmons' enterprises.

Simmons' efforts to promote Def Jam's artists in as wide a capacity as possible ultimately culminated in a distribution deal with Columbia Records in October of 1985. The deal was facilitated by Steve Ralbovsky, an A&R representative for Columbia who had a relationship Simmons dating from 1983 during Simmons' attempts to find Run-DMC a record deal. Ralbovsky recalled Simmons' successful presentation to Columbia's executives, Simmons "started laying it all out for them: the different names of the groups, the different artists. It just had a flavor. It was the unveiling of this subculture that was received with these big smiles and laughs and head-shaking. Like, 'Oh, my god! There's this whole other world out there!'"<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, Columbia was clearly interested in Def Jam because of its recent mainstream exposure. Indeed, in a press release announcing the deal, Columbia Records highlighted the impending release of *Krush Groove* and the Beastie Boys tour with Madonna as reasons for Columbia's interest in Def Jam.<sup>106</sup> Enchanted by Simmons, Columbia's executives signed Def Jam to a \$2 million production deal.<sup>107</sup>

The deal promised that Def Jam would deliver four albums by four different artists to Columbia by the end of 1986, within the deal's first full year, with two to follow in the next, and subsequent years to be negotiated at a later point.<sup>108</sup> Def Jam

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* 79.

<sup>106</sup> "Def Jam and Columbia Set World Wide Agreement: Beastie Boys and LL Cool J First Releases" October 9, 1985. <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/defjam/exhibition/columbia/index.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 151.

<sup>108</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc* 62.

also received an advance and fourteen royalty points on each album, but the royalties were cross-collateralized, which allowed for Columbia to cover the losses of an unsuccessful album through the royalties from a successful one.<sup>109</sup> As a whole, the deal was not particularly generous, but Simmons was more interested in the exposure as well as Columbia's distribution and marketing capacities than personal finances. He would recall, "If Rick and I had stayed independent back in 1984, I could have made a lot more money per record sold. However, without the power of [Columbia's] distribution and marketing clot...[our artists] never would have gotten as big as they did."<sup>110</sup> Simmons would also clarify, "We did that deal for the artists and to grow the culture, but as an owner, I really did not get paid. Def Jam grossed millions for [Columbia], but I netted only a fraction of the profit generated."<sup>111</sup> Regardless of any misgivings, Simmons and Rubin celebrated the deal with a "White Castle Party" on the roof of the Danceteria, a popular Manhattan Hip-Hop club. The party, which featured thousands of White Castle hamburgers, culminated in a giant food fight instigated by the Beastie Boys.<sup>112</sup>

In addition to the money promised to Def Jam, Simmons and Rubin were given a \$600,000 advance check from Columbia to split between the two of them. At Rubin's urging, the duo decided to invest the bulk of their advance on a four-story

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<sup>109</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 151.

<sup>110</sup> Simmons. *Life and Def*. 110.

<sup>111</sup> The deal was with Columbia Records, who was a subsidiary of CBS. In additionally, Sony would buy out CBS/Columbia in 1988. Simmons and other Def Jam executives use the three company names interchangeably when talking about the initial record deal. For ease of understanding, the term 'Columbia' will be used as a catch-all in quotations *Ibid*.110.

<sup>112</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc*. 64-65.

office building at 298 Elizabeth Street in Manhattan to serve as a joint office for both Def Jam and Rush Management.<sup>113</sup> Although the space was dilapidated and in need of serious renovations, it would allow both companies an office, as well as space to construct their own private studio. The renovations would ultimately last fourteen-months, but at their culmination, Def Jam Records had a home more professional than a dorm room at NYU. In the interim period while the construction was occurring at the new office, the companies split a former dance studio at 40 East 19<sup>th</sup> Street. In addition to office space, half the studio was walled off to serve as a residence for Simmons and Cohen, who had proved himself invaluable to Simmons and become his right-hand man at Rush Management.<sup>114</sup>

With both a distribution deal with a major label and office space secured, Simmons and Rubin began their pursuit of success for Def Jam. LL Cool J was tapped to release the first full-length album on Def Jam Records. Entitled *Radio* and largely produced by Rubin, the album was issued in November of 1985. Aided by Columbia's impressive publicity and distribution departments, the album was successful with urban and suburban Hip-Hop fans. *Radio* sold 500,000 copies within the first 5 months of its release, with over a million sold by 1988.<sup>115</sup> Even more impressive, by the end of 1985, *Radio* had single-handedly recouped Def Jam's initial advance from Columbia.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

<sup>114</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 158.

<sup>115</sup> James Todd Smith. (1990). *Radio* (reissue). CD liner booklet. Def Jam Recordings. 1-4.

<sup>116</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 154.

Despite the success of *Radio*, Simmons and Rubin chose for the label's follow-up albums to come from non-Hip-Hop acts. Oran 'Juice' Jones was an R&B singer and a pet project of Simmons. His self-titled album was released in 1986 to modest success, thanks in large part to the strength of the single "The Rain," but paled in comparison to the sales of *Radio*. 1986's next album release from Def Jam was *Slayer's Reign in Blood*. The group was a white thrash metal band and was only signed to the label thanks to Rubin's insistence. Although critically acclaimed, the album was even less successful than Jones' and did not continue the commercial success brought by LL Cool J.

The final album released by Def Jam in 1986 was from a Hip-Hop act, and became the biggest commercial success for the burgeoning label. Rubin had been working on a full-length album with the Beastie Boys since 1984, but it languished in development until November of 1986. *Licensed to Ill* was the fastest selling debut album in Columbia Records' history and was certified Platinum in February of 1987.<sup>117</sup> In addition, the record also topped Billboard's chart for best-selling albums and was Def Jam's first number one album. Thanks to the success of the Beasties, Columbia's deal with Def Jam was now profitable, and the label brought in millions of dollars for the larger company.

Def Jam's success with Hip-Hop artists continued with the signing of Public Enemy. The group, comprised of rappers Carlton "Chuck D" Ridenhour, Richard "Professor Griff" Griffin, and William "Flavor Flav" Drayton, Jr, along their DJ Richard

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<sup>117</sup> The album would ultimately go 'Diamond', an RIAA designation for selling over 10 million copies in 2015. Brittany Spanos. '29 Years Later, Beastie Boys' 'License to Ill' Sells 10 Million Copies'. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/29-years-later-beastie-boys-licensed-to-ill-sells-10-million-copies-20150318>.

“Terminator X” Rogers, and a group of uniform-clad security/dancers collectively known as the Security of the First World or “S1Ws”, was a boon to Def Jam’s label. Unafraid of being controversial, racial, and political, the group’s debut album *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* was released in February of 1987 to critical acclaim. As time went on, Public Enemy would be held as exemplarily of the label’s political edge to dispute claims Def Jam had lost its edge or become too tame.

Despite the continuing success of Def Jam Records, Simmons became more disengaged with the running of the label. Partially, this was due to his involvement with Rush Management and his brother’s group in particular. Run-DMC had a massive cross-over hit with 1986’s “Walk This Way,” a collaboration with white rockers Aerosmith, that peaked at #4 on the *Billboard* hot 100 chart, the first Hip-Hop single to chart in the top 5. In addition, *Raising Hell*, Run-DMC’s album produced by Rubin for Profile Records was a similar smash. The album, released on July 4, 1986, was the first Platinum-selling rap album and brought in even more acclaim for the group.<sup>118</sup> Simmons bolstered the group’s popularity, already at an all-time high, by securing an endorsement deal with shoemaker Adidas. The deal, initiated by Simmons in an angel-dust induced high, but facilitated by Cohen, earned the rappers an endorsement agreement worth \$1 million and eventually expanded into their own shoe line.<sup>119</sup>

Simmons began to spend more time away from both of his businesses and instead held court in various New York nightclubs. Simmons, who had engaged in

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<sup>118</sup> Gueraseva, *DefJam, Inc.* 91.

<sup>119</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback.* 185.

recreational drug use since his days as a marijuana dealer, had moved on to harder drugs. He was most enamored with PCP, or angel dust, and would later recall his attraction to the drug, “it wasn’t a cool rush like cocaine or trippy like acid, but it did something to your head that was unique to each person. Personally, I loved getting ‘dusty.’ It made me happy.”<sup>120</sup> Yet, Simmons was also fond of cocaine, as producer Arthur Blake would recall, “I remember the smell of burning cocaine in the cigarette: a sort of sickly sweet smell.”<sup>121</sup> Despite having two large companies, as well as numerous artists to manage, Simmons was more than content to delegate his work to subordinates, leaving him the time to spend high and out of the office. In Simmons’ absence, Lyor Cohen proved himself indispensable at Rush Management, and Cohen’s influence was increasingly felt at Def Jam, much to the dismay of Rubin.<sup>122</sup> Although Rubin would not directly express his discontent with Simmons’ absence and Cohen’s ascension to his business partner, tension was growing between the two Def Jam founders as 1986 drew to a close.

A November 4, 1986, article in the *Village Voice* exasperated the simmering tension between Def Jam’s co-founders. The article proclaimed, “He’s the King of Rap, There is None Higher, CBS Execs All Call Him Sire” before bestowing the title solely upon Rubin.<sup>123</sup> The article hailed Rubin as the actual brains behind the Hip-Hop phenomenon, only mentioning Simmons in passing. The article also highlighted Rubin’s privileged upbringing and criticized his lack of knowledge concerning

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<sup>120</sup> Simmons. *Life and Def*. 32.

<sup>121</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 95.

<sup>122</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 183.

<sup>123</sup> Barry Walters. ‘The King of Rap.’ *Village Voice*. November 4, 1986. 1.

musical theory. The article was upsetting to many at both Def Jam and Rush Management, but it was Run who drafted an angry response to the *Voice's* editors to defend his brother. Run wrote, "If anybody's the King of Rap, it's Run-DMC. And if it's not us, it's my brother Russell Simmons, who's charted twenty-one singles this year."<sup>124</sup> He continued, "Rick Rubin is not just a very close friend of mine, he's a great multi-talent deserving of acclaim. But it fucks me up that anybody thinks that he made my album. When I write my lyrics, I write the music and the final mix at the same time, and that's the motherfucking truth!"<sup>125</sup> To his credit, Rubin was regretful of the tone of the article. He recalled, "I felt bad....It did kind of hurt my feelings, 'cause I felt like we were all on the same team....It's not like I had my own publicist working for me."<sup>126</sup> Despite Rubin's remorse, the article further strained an already edgy relationship between Def Jam's founders.

Still, as 1987 began, Def Jam had a rosy outlook for the future. Rubin had agreed to direct *Tougher Than Leather*, a Run-DMC-starring follow-up to *Krush Groove*, which both founders hoped would be more serious in tone than its predecessor. Additionally, the label had two established platinum-selling artists in LL Cool J and the Beastie Boys, with newly signed acts like Public Enemy up and coming. Expectations for the label were high and were, by and large, fulfilled. Thanks to the continued success of *Licensed to Ill* and LL Cool J's sophomore release, *Bigger and Deffer*, as well as the soundtrack to the film *Less Than Zero*, 1987 was the

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<sup>124</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 183.

<sup>125</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 103.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* 103.

most profitable year for Def Jam Records. This level of success would not be repeated for the label for ten years.<sup>127</sup>

The tensions between company's founders were becoming irreversible. Although the company was able to find commercial success, most of its profits were going to Columbia thanks to a distribution deal that heavily favored the larger company. Further complicating financial matters, for the first three years of its existence, Def Jam was not properly registered with ASCAP or BMI, which prevented artists and the label from receiving their full performance royalties.<sup>128</sup> Even when Def Jam was able to earn money, the close relationship between it and Rush Management resulted in money from both enterprises being used indiscriminately for either company. Since the two companies shared the same set of books, there was no way to truly tell the income of either company. Although growing in popularity, without a major change in management and structure, Def Jam would be unable to survive as a business.

Simmons' immediate response to the challenges facing Def Jam was to promote Cohen even higher. Cohen, according to staffer Faith Newman became Simmons' heavy: "somebody to say no, somebody to yell, to take the heat."<sup>129</sup> The move allowed Simmons to maintain his role as a visionary, while Cohen became the hardline negotiator who turned Simmons' dreams into practical reality. Cohen was able to straighten out Def Jam and Rush Management's books, to an extent, and

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* 138.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* 121.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* 144.



enforce more professionalism in the office. However, Cohen's ascension in the Def Jam hierarchy infuriated Rubin, who felt Cohen sacrificed artistic integrity for Def Jam's marketability. In addition, Rubin felt Simmons was being far too passive and hands off with the company they had jointly founded: "I don't remember Russell taking a very active role. I think of him as being passive, just hoping it would work out."<sup>130</sup> The contention between Cohen and Rubin started a split within the Def Jam offices. Although Simmons tried to stay as neutral as possible in the conflict, the tension eventually affected the founder. As he confided in Bill Adler, the long-time personal relations head for Def Jam, "Bill, my Jews are fighting."<sup>131</sup>

Simmons' issues were compounded by troubles with Profile Records, the label who signed Run-DMC, a Rush Management act. Despite the group's success, Profile was only paying the act a portion of its earned royalties. For instance, in the summer of 1986, Simmons received a check for \$486,994, representing the royalties for 250,000 units of *Raising Hell*. However, the Run-DMC album had certified sales of one million units, with actual sales approaching three million.<sup>132</sup> In addition to withholding royalties, Profile demanded Run-DMC release a second contractually obligated album by October 1<sup>st</sup> of 1986. However, Run-DMC was scheduled to be on tour until January of 1987. Profile refused to pay the group any money until the album was received; a deal which Simmons and the group felt was impossible due to the touring schedule. In response, Simmons informed Profile the group would not

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<sup>130</sup> Whisler *DefJam Recordings*. 94.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

<sup>132</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 186.

deliver any new music until they paid \$6.8 million, the amount of royalties owed to the group from the success of *Raising Hell*. Profile accused Simmons of being unreasonable and alleged his hardball tactics were only a ploy to have the group released from their contract in order to sign with Def Jam.

This brinkmanship continued until August 3, 1987, when Rush Management filed suit against Profile, accusing the company of nonpayment of royalties and “fraudulent accounting practices.”<sup>133</sup> Profile responded with a counter-suit contending Simmons was out to defame the record label in order to have the group sign for his own private label. The suit eventually would be settled out of court in the spring of 1988. The settlement kept Run-DMC on Profile for ten more albums, but for a higher royalty rate of 40 percent.<sup>134</sup> However, in the two years since Run-DMC released *Raising Hell*, the public had moved on from the group. Their follow-up album, *Tougher Than Leather*, failed, costing more in printing and distribution than it actually returned. Likewise, their Rick Rubin-directed feature film, also entitled *Tougher Than Leather* (1988), bombed at the box-office. Despite Simmons’ best efforts, his brother’s group was no longer the superstars they once were.

Issues were also brewing at Def Jam with the Beastie Boys. The act, still hugely popular from *Licensed to Ill*, was seeking out new business opportunities. Cohen had negotiated a deal with Universal Studios to film a comedic-horror picture starring the group entitled *Scared Stupid*. Rubin balked at the idea, finding it too commercial and middlebrow for his tastes. Undeterred by Rubin’s hesitancy, the

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* 187.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* 199.

group and Cohen pressed on. In retaliation, Rubin refused to let the hypothetical film contain any of the group's songs, since Def Jam owned the rights to the Beastie Boys' music.<sup>135</sup> Faced with the prospect of a film starting the Beastie Boys without any of their music, Universal stopped pursuing the project. Upset with Cohen's encroachment on the group Rubin had initially brought to the label, in addition to his ongoing dissatisfaction with Def Jam's managerial direction, Rubin began advising the group to seek other labels. Adam Horovitz recalled Rubin telling him about the royalty deal the group had with Def Jam: "I forget exactly what the numbers were-but like, the Beasties got three, and he and Russell got thirty-five...I remember going back to Adam and Mike and telling them about the points. That's when it all starting going south- and it all happened really fast."<sup>136</sup> Upset by what they deemed an unfair split, the group decided to not record their contractually obligated next album for Def Jam. In response, Def Jam withheld the group's royalties from *Licensed to Ill* and threatened to sue them for breach of contract. The situation culminated when the group left Def Jam to sign a \$3.6 million contract with Capital Records.<sup>137</sup> The Beastie Boys leaving Def Jam was a heart-breaking situation for all parties. Simmons would later call the group's departure the biggest mistake he had ever made.<sup>138</sup> Rubin would likewise feel sadness recalling the situation: "The

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* 183.

<sup>136</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings.* 94.

<sup>137</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 151.

<sup>138</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings.* 96.

Beasties' leaving really broke my heart. It was really sad because I really felt like a big part of them and this was our thing together."<sup>139</sup>

The departure of the Beasties Boys was the final straw for Rubin's growing discontent with Def Jam. He was tired of Simmons inaction, as well as Cohen's influence on steering the label towards pure commercialism. In addition, Rubin had relocated away from Def Jam's offices in New York for a residence in Los Angeles, where he became aloof and unconnected from the everyday goings on at the label. Although he enjoyed Simmons' company, Rubin was no longer interested in running a record label with him. In the summer of 1988 Rubin met with his friend and business partner at the NoHo Star restaurant on the corner of Lafayette and Bleecker near Def Jam's offices in Manhattan.<sup>140</sup> There, the two founders shared a meal, and Rubin said he wanted to dissolve their partnership. Simmons agreed that their partnership had run its course, and the founders divided up their assets. Rubin would take the artists that Simmons had little interest in (primarily hard rock acts like Danzig, Slayer, and Masters of Reality) and form his own label in California, Def America. Simmons would maintain Def Jam's name, logo, and Hip-Hop and R&B acts. Although saddened to leave the company he had founded, Rubin would later remark on how the split was ultimately mutually beneficial to both parties: "It's interesting how our lives played out because we both got what we wanted. My goals were always related to creating great art. Russell's goal, I think, was always to get a

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* 96.

<sup>140</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 197.

check.”<sup>141</sup> At age twenty-five, Rubin publically left the company he had founded in his dorm room. Although he would retain a large percentage of ownership in the label, Rubin officially had no more say in the company’s direction.

The split between Rubin and Simmons was met with varying degrees of surprise from Def Jam staffers, but most felt Rubin’s departure would not ultimately harm the label. Bill Stephney, who was promoted to president of Def Jam following Rubin’s departure, recalled his reaction to the news: “I felt like my parents were divorcing....they had been fighting for years, and there was finally a resolution.”<sup>142</sup> However, he still held fast to Simmons’ centrality for the ongoing success of the label, “But if Rick built Def Jam, it’s still subordinate to Russell’s building hip-hop. Russell built the *culture*. There would be no hip Def Jam, or the success of Rick with Def Jam, without the magic of Russell Simmons, who essentially carried the culture on his shoulders and moved it all along.”<sup>143</sup> Lyor Cohen, who embodied much of Rubin’s growing resentment at Def Jam, was similarly nonchalant: “Was I surprised when Rick left? Yes, but necessity’s a motherfucker, so what else was supposed to happen? There was no other way it could’ve played out.”<sup>144</sup> Columbia’s reaction to the split was likewise unconcerned. Ruben Rodriguez, Columbia’s VP of Black Music at the time of the departure responded with “the face of Def Jam was Russell. You

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<sup>141</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings*, 116.

<sup>142</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 152.

<sup>143</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings*, 116.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* 116.

never want to see a combination like that break up, but I didn't worry, because I felt like Russell could stand on his own."<sup>145</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Rubin's departure from Def Jam resulted with Simmons delegating even more power to Cohen in the fall of 1988. Although technically still a part of Rush Management, Cohen's role as Simmons' surrogate at Def Jam resulted in more stable growth for the company. More acts were signed, including a one-eyed British born rapper Ricky "Slick Rick" Walters, the Long Island-based duo EPMD, and the white rapper duo 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass. In addition, Public Enemy was immensely popular, with their sophomore album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* going platinum by the summer of 1989. In addition, Cohen hired Carmen Ashhurst to serve as an administrator for Simmons' various enterprises. It was under the advice of Ashhurst that Simmons consolidated his various ventures underneath a single parent company. The new company, called Rush Communications, not only contained Def Jam and Rush Management, but would, in time, consist of fashion brands, advertising firms, and philanthropic pursuits, as well as film and television productions.<sup>146</sup> The formation of Rush Communications also separated the books of Def Jam and Rush Management, which had been indiscriminately mixed since the founding of Def Jam five years prior.

1989 also marked a major change in Simmons' behavior. After years of neglecting his responsibilities at his companies in favor of nightclubs and drugs, Simmons sobered up and became obsessed with his health. This obsession began

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<sup>145</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 153.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* 158.

when Robert Rodriguez, Columbia's VP of Black Music, forced Simmons to visit the Tenth Street Baths, a Russian Bathhouse in the East Village. Simmons found the baths were more exhilarating than drug use had been. He also began trying a healthier diet and was particularly taken by sushi at a time when it was not widely popular in the United States. Although still unlikely to visit Def Jam's office, Simmons started to take a more active role in his businesses from his apartment, calling distributors in order to make sure Def Jam was receiving its proper royalties and Cohen to insure the office was being run well. By the spring of 1989, Def Jam had outgrown its offices on Elizabeth Street and decided to move into a loft space at 652 Broadway.<sup>147</sup> This move to a new office was to begin a revitalization for Def Jam after the departure of Rubin.

Yet Simmons' revitalization corresponded with a downturn in the fortunes and popularity of Def Jam and its artists. Artists who had previously been reliable hit-makers like LL Cool J were not replicating their earlier successes. In addition, the new acts signed by the label, such as Newkirk who was designed to be Def Jam's answer to Prince, were similarly unsuccessful. Def Jam's lack of sales hurt their relationship with Columbia. Seeking to expand their chances for success, Simmons and Cohen decided to form Rush Associated Labels, or RAL for short. RAL would give artists their own imprint on Def Jam, much like how Def Jam was a subsidiary of Columbia. In exchange for a hefty percentage of the imprints' ownership, RAL would allow artists to seek out their own groups and hopefully find the next great hit rappers and musicians. The creation of RAL was initially a success, thanks in large

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* 167.

part to JMJ Records, an imprint founded by Run-DMC member Jam Master Jay, and Dew Doo Man, formed by upcoming music producer Paul “Prince Paul” Huston.

In celebration of Def Jam’s improved prospects, Simmons moved into a \$1.6 million penthouse apartment at 692 Broadway and Fourth Street previously owned by Cher. Simmons’ relocation also corresponded to his increasing inclusion in mainstream celebrity. For instance, one of Simmons’ new neighbors was actor Robert De Niro. Within a month of moving to the new building, Simmons was a partner in De Niro’s restaurant Tribeca Bar & Grill.<sup>148</sup> Simmons grew fond of the upscale lifestyle, relishing trips to ritzy locales like the Hamptons and St. Barthelme. He would recall feeling very included in this new world, “the people I encountered and befriended in these upscale environments helped me see how the [Hip-Hop] culture was going mainstream and find links where other people saw barriers.”<sup>149</sup> Simmons’ new upscale lifestyle included an interest in models. His lust for models would in time become as of equal a vice as his interest in nightclubs and drugs had previously been.

But Simmons’ personal gains did not equate benefit for his company. The initial success of RAL was not long-lasting. The imprint labels grew too large in number, were too expensive in their start-up costs, and never returned the hit records Simmons had expected. Although some successful new artists were signed by Def Jam during this time period, such as Clifford “Method Man” Smith of the Wu-Tang Clan and Reginald “Redman” Noble, their inclusion did not help in reducing Def

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* 185.

<sup>149</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*, 164.



Jam's growing debt to Columbia. In addition, Gangsta Rap, which was more violent and aggressive than Def Jam's Hip-Hop offerings, was growing in popularity in the early 1990s. Def Jam's music, which had once been at the height of popularity and synonymous with rap music, was beginning to lose its edge. The one bright spot for the Def Jam label during this time period was the success of *Def Comedy Jam* on television. The show, produced by Simmons as part of his Rush Pictures and broadcast by HBO, was considerably popular, attracting 1.7 million viewers during its first season.<sup>150</sup> *Def Comedy Jam* was an outlet for black comedians and launched many careers, such as those of Bernie Mac, Jamie Foxx, Chris Tucker, and Martin Lawrence. The television show, each episode of which concluded with Simmons bidding the audience farewell, kept up Def Jam's profile even though the company was lagging in sales.

Simmons' personal profile was also bolstered by his other enterprises. In particular, his clothing label Phat Farm would come to exemplify Simmons as much as his ownership of Def Jam. Founded in 1992 with a starting capital of around half a million dollars, Phat Farm existed in the same market space with Fubu, Wu-Wear, and other brands marketing clothes to urban youth. Although it took six years for the company to become profitable, Simmons gladly invested "\$10 million in cash in that company 'cause I believed in my vision."<sup>151</sup> Simmons' vision would be

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<sup>150</sup> Greg Braxton. "LAUGHZ N THE HOOD : Television: A Showcase for Unknown Black Comics, 'Russell Simmons' Def Comedy Jam' Begins Its Second Season Friday on HBO." Los Angeles Times. July 06, 1992. Accessed January 29, 2016. [http://articles.latimes.com/1992-08-06/entertainment/ca-5268\\_1\\_def-comedy-jam/2](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-08-06/entertainment/ca-5268_1_def-comedy-jam/2).

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.* 157.

rewarded, as Phat Farm would gross over \$225 million in revenue in the year 2000 alone, demonstrating Simmons' belief in the company's future was substantiated.

However successful Simmons' other ventures were, that success did not detract from the fact that Def Jam was increasingly in debt to Columbia, and its parent company Sony. Although RAL was designed to increase the label's revenue, its limited success resulted in Def Jam owing Columbia over \$17 million by 1994. Although Def Jam was able to find limited success thanks to new artists like the rap group Onyx and had recently signed West Coast Gangsta Rapper Warren "Warren G" Griffin, who was the stepbrother of famed producer Andre "Dr. Dre" Young, it did little to alleviate their debt. With Simmons more interested in other ventures, it fell upon Lyor Cohen to figure out a way Def Jam could come out from this debt. The first action Cohen did was to officially eliminate Rush Management. Cohen found the company to be a financial drain, since he was constantly "advancing money, loaning money, deferring commissions....I didn't want to chase anyone down for a commission check."<sup>152</sup> Cohen also began actively courting other major record labels to acquire Def Jam and hopefully relieve their debt to Columbia. He found limited success at first, with meetings at RCA and other labels going poorly.

However, the conglomerate Polygram had been purchasing music labels hoping to get into the black music business. Having acquired Motown in 1993, Cohen rightfully believed Polygram was more interested in purchasing name recognition rather than financially profitable companies. Cohen began negotiations with the firm in the summer of 1994. Polygram was hesitant at first, since Public

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<sup>152</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings*. 134.

Enemy's album released in August of 1994, *Muse Sick-n-Hour Mess Age*, was a critical and commercial failure, but the success of Warren G's "Regulate" convinced them that Def Jam was still relevant.<sup>153</sup> The deal, which was officially announced in September, gave Polygram a 50 percent equity stake in exchange for around \$33 million. Simmons would later call the deal "the greatest thing in the world," since "here's a label that was defunct and worth nothing and that owes \$17 million to its parent company, and we sell it for \$33 million."<sup>154</sup> Simmons would also boast, "so instead of being \$17 million in the hole, we ended up with \$15 million in the black after lawyers' and accountants fees."<sup>155</sup> The move also cemented Cohen as the power at Def Jam, although Simmons was still the face of the company. An executive at Polygram informed Cohen that Simmons, even half-focused, was worth double of what Polygram paid for Def Jam.<sup>156</sup> The deal with Polygram also allowed Cohen and Simmons to resolve issues with Rubin, who was now firmly in place in California with his own record label. The influx of cash allowed for Rubin to be bought out from his ownership points and fully restored the friendship between himself and Simmons. Although the two had their differences as co-founders and owners of Def Jam, their personal relationship was completely mended.

The Polygram deal gave new life to Def Jam at a time when rap music was once again in flux. Def Jam scored a major hit with Warren G's "Regulate" in the winter of 1994, which gave the label some creditability in the realm of Gangsta Rap

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<sup>153</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 241.

<sup>154</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings.* 142.

<sup>155</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def.* 113.

<sup>156</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings.* 142.

where it was otherwise lacking. However, the trends of rap music were changing once again. Sean Combs, a former intern at Andre Harrell's Uptown Records, had started his own label called Bad Boy. Combs' flashy demeanor both personally and for his artists clashed with the more subdued imagery prevalent in East Coast rap, such as those demonstrated by Def Jam. Bad Boy artists soared in popularity as a whole, while Def Jam was still searching to get its footing in this new trend. Long-time staffer Chris Lighty recalled, "We were fighting against Puffy, just for survival."<sup>157</sup>

The change in taste also corresponded with changes in Def Jam's artists. Long-time acts like Public Enemy left the label. Ridenhour, the group's leader, had grown dissatisfied with Def Jam's direction, calling the company "nothing but followers. They're an irresponsible crack house of a record company."<sup>158</sup> In addition, Simmons' personality strained relationships with other Def Jam artists. Richard "Slick Rick" Walters appeared in a segment 1995's *The Show*, a documentary about Hip-Hop. The segment shows Simmons visiting Walters, serving out a sentence for attempted murder, in prison. Although Simmons was cordial to Walters on camera, his voice-over berated Walters, who he called "as crazy as a bag of angel dust."<sup>159</sup> In addition, Simmons stated the only reason he was going to see Walters was because of the documentary, adding "make sure you keep that in, I want it to be real."<sup>160</sup> The move upset Walters, who felt betrayed by Simmons. He would later recall: "you

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<sup>157</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 256.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* 251.

<sup>159</sup> *The Show* (1995) Savoy Pictures.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

extend yourself to the label; you show all this love to the label...only for them to turn around and try to disrespect you.”<sup>161</sup> Def Jam’s moves to dismiss older artists in order to adapt to a changing marketplace were marginally successful, but they needed to be replaced by younger talent.

Realizing the mistakes made by the unprofitable Rush Associated Labels fiasco, Def Jam tweaked its strategy when it came to signing future acts. Instead of assigning an already established artist a label for which they could find new performers, in essence serving as a de facto talent scouts for the label, Def Jam would instead find pre-established small record labels and become their distributor. The previously independent label would become a subsidiary of Def Jam and their parent company Polygram, but would gain the distribution and marketing dollars of the larger company, as well as being affiliated with the Def Jam name. The first project undertaken under this new system was the signing of Irving “Irv Gotti” Lorenzo, who managed a stable of artists known as the Cash Money Click. Lorenzo was signed by Cohen in later 1995 in order to reach Cash Money Click’s star artist, a young rapper from Hollis, Queens named Jeffery “Ja Rule” Atkins. Although Atkins was already under contract with the independent TVT records, Lorenzo’s scouting abilities impressed Cohen. Cohen charged Lorenzo to scout out more acts and independent labels that could be signed to Def Jam.

Lorenzo’s abilities did not disappoint. The first artist Lorenzo brought to the attention of Def Jam was a Brooklyn-born former drug dealer named Shawn Carter, who adopted “Jay-Z” as his stage name. Carter had formed his own record label, Roc-

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<sup>161</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 255.

a-Fella Records, in 1995 with two other partners: Kareem “Biggs” Burke, another former drug dealer who fronted much of the money for the record label and otherwise stayed largely silent and elusive, and Damon Dash, a boisterous front man who sought to monetize and commercialize the Roc-a-Fella name as ostentatiously as possible. They founded the company with the sole intent of insuring Carter’s music would get as much distribution by any means necessary, and thereby be lucrative for the founders. The founders’ first meeting with Def Jam executive Kevin Liles in 1996 began with the Roc-a-Fella trio placing a shopping bag full of cash on Liles’ desk in order to serve as a bribe to ensure distribution. Liles recalls rebuffing the offer and stating, “instead of me looking in the bag, let me hear the records...cause I can’t promise to get dog shit played on the radio.”<sup>162</sup> The bribe was ultimately unnecessary since Liles was impressed by Carter’s rhymes and offered to sign him as an artist to Def Jam. However, Carter responded to the offer negatively and said: “I don’t rap for a record company. I *own* a record company.”<sup>163</sup> Stunned by Carter’s candor, Liles offered to aid in helping the company sign a distribution deal with Def Jam. The agreement between Roc-a-Fella and Def Jam was eventually signed on April 8, 1997, and gave Roc-a-Fella complete autonomy to hire and fire artists, as well as limited association with their new parent company.<sup>164</sup> The deal would be massively successful for both companies, as Carter would become a multi-

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<sup>162</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings*. 188.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* 188.

<sup>164</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 267.

platinum-selling artist, and Roc-a-Fella Records would likewise sign numerous successful acts, most notably the rapper-producer Kanye West.

Lorenzo's other signings were similarly successful. Shortly after bringing Carter to Def Jam, Lorenzo also brought Earl "DMX" Simmons to the label.<sup>165</sup> Originally from Yonkers, DMX's gravelly voice and explicit pain-filled rhymes were unlike anything previously heard in Hip-Hop, and Lorenzo was certain DMX would be a massive hit. Lorenzo's belief was mocked by his bosses at Def Jam, who doubted DMX's persona would be successful. Julie Greenwald, a senior executive at Def Jam, remembered Lorenzo writing three things on a whiteboard behind her desk: DMX, a triangle (the symbol used to denote platinum album sales), and the number five. She recalled her disbelief: "Get outta here, Irv! This kid ain't gonna sell five million records."<sup>166</sup> However, Greenwald was mistaken about Lorenzo's prediction as well as DMX's sales. DMX's first album alone, *It's Dark & Hell is Hot*, released in May of 1998, debuted at number one on the *Billboard* charts en route to going four times platinum.<sup>167</sup> DMX followed up this album's success with a second album the same year. *Flesh of My Flesh, Blood of My Blood* was released in December of 1998 and similarly debuted at number one on *Billboard*. Although *Flesh of My Flesh* only went three times platinum as opposed to its predecessor's four, DMX's impressive sales

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<sup>165</sup> Earl Simmons is no relation to Russell Simmons and will be called DMX in this work in order to easily distinguish between the two men.

<sup>166</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings*. 200.

<sup>167</sup> <http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php>

demonstrated Lorenzo's capacity to find artists and was the capstone to 1998, Def Jam's most profitable year as a company.<sup>168</sup>

Def Jam's success in 1998 also corresponded to changes in Simmons' personal life. On December 20, 1998, Simmons married model Kimora Lee at a private ceremony on the island St. Barthélemy performed by Simmons' brother Run, who had become an ordained minister following the downturn of Run-DMC's popularity. The marriage was the culmination of several changes in Simmons' life. Simmons had become a vegan, embraced Eastern spiritualism and philosophy, and had become an ardent practitioner of yoga in the ten years since becoming sober in the late 1980s. Although Simmons was still as driven as he had ever been while on drugs in Def Jam's formative years, he viewed marriage and the changes in his life as a maturation of his earlier hustle. He would write, "my first forty years were about consumption and money and power, I am hopeful that years to come will be about service."<sup>169</sup> He would likewise remark he wanted his tombstone to read "Philanthropist," not "Greedy Entrepreneur."<sup>170</sup>

Regardless of the changes in Simmons' personal views on money, it remained that 1998 was incredibly profitable for Def Jam, and 1999 would bring an even larger personal payday for Simmons. In May of 1998, Seagram's, a Canadian beverage and entertainment conglomerate that already owned MCA, Interscope, and Geffen Records under its Universal Music umbrella, purchased Polygram and all its

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<sup>168</sup> Whisler. *Def Jam Recordings*. 212.

<sup>169</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*. 219.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* 219.



assets for \$10.6 billion.<sup>171</sup> The deal also stated Universal would purchase Polygram's fifty percent stake in Def Jam in 1999 at a rate determined by an equation based upon Def Jam's sales numbers for the prior year. Because 1998 was an unprecedentedly successful year for the label, Def Jam pocketed \$135 million from the deal.<sup>172</sup> In addition, Simmons negotiated with Universal to sell his remaining forty percent stake in Def Jam, leaving him no equity in the company. The deal, completed in April of 1999 and the numbers of which are still private, earned Simmons in the neighborhood of 130 million dollars.<sup>173</sup> With the sale, Def Jam became the black music arm of Universal's Island Def Jam group, which kept Lyor Cohen as its co-president. As co-president, Cohen would also oversee rock acts signed to Island, as well as the rap groups on Def Jam. Ironically, Cohen also became the boss of Rick Rubin, whose American Records label was now part of the Island Def Jam group thanks to Universal's reorganization.<sup>174</sup> Even though Rubin left Def Jam to escape Cohen's influence, he was ultimately unable to permanently avoid his adversary at the label.

Simmons remained at Island Def Jam for a time as honorary chairman of Def Jam, but his interest was firmly in his other enterprises. By 2004, Simmons' Rush

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<sup>171</sup> "Seagram buys PolyGram: Company will take Tropicana public to help finance \$10.6 billion deal" May 21, 1998. CNN.

<http://money.cnn.com/1998/05/21/deals/tropicana/>

<sup>172</sup> Whisler. *DefJam Recordings*. 214.

<sup>173</sup> The exact number that Simmons sold his stake in Def Jam to Universal for was fairly fluid. Most biographies of Simmons stated the sale was around \$100 million, but Stacy Gueraseva's *DefJam, Inc.*, which is the most exhaustive book previously written about Def Jam's existence, claimed Simmons earned \$250 million dollars for the deal. The claim of \$130 million for forty percent of Def Jam comes from Simmons' autobiography, where he mentions the number, but is otherwise uncharacteristically coy on the details of the purchase by Universal.

<sup>174</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 275.

Communications business had several firms in enterprises as diverse as reality television, poetry slams, and pre-paid debit cards. In addition, he sold Phat Farm to the Kellwood Company for \$140 million in early 2004.<sup>175</sup> Simmons would utilize the proceeds from these massive sales to start other businesses. Although many of his start-ups failed, such as the Rush Modeling Agency, Rush Broadcasting, and *OneWorld* Magazine, he remained unafraid in pioneering Hip-Hop culture in other industries. Although no longer directly involved in the creation of rap music recordings, Simmons embodied the Hip-Hop culture he helped to create long after his time as head of Def Jam.

Def Jam initially had success following its sale to Universal. The new millennium began with the label expanded into new markets, including an R&B label (Def Soul), a label dedicated to Southern Rap (Def Jam South, headlined by Chris “Ludacris” Bridges and his Disturbing Tha Peace posse), Def Jam Germany, and even video games (the company’s first release was 2003’s *Def Jam Vendetta* which depicted rappers fighting as professional wrestlers). In addition, Lorenzo was rewarded with his own imprint on Island Def Jam, which he named Murder Inc., and was similarly successful. Cohen also expanded Island Def Jam’s influence on other genres, offering an executive position to Fred Durst, the lead singer of the rap-metal group Limp Bizkit, and signing diva Maria Carey to a lavish \$28 million deal in 2002. Island Def Jam was massively successful and brought in \$100 million in profits

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<sup>175</sup> Tracie Rozhon. “Phat Fashions Is Being Sold To Kellwood for \$140 Million” *New York Times*. January 9, 2004. [http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/09/business/phat-fashions-is-being-sold-to-kellwood-for-140-million.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/09/business/phat-fashions-is-being-sold-to-kellwood-for-140-million.html?_r=0)

during the year 2001 alone.<sup>176</sup> Rick Rubin even returned to Island Def Jam to serve as a producer on Carter's 2003 release *The Black Album*. The song "99 Problems" marked Rubin's return to producing rap music for the first time since 1989.

Despite the success, Cohen grew listless at Island Def Jam. The splashy moves he had made, such as signing Mariah Carey, had not panned out as expected. In addition, Lorenzo's Murder Inc. label was under federal investigation for money laundering. Unwilling to correct the issues at Island Def Jam, Cohen left the company in early 2004 to take a position as CEO of Warner Music Group, Time Warner's record division. Cohen stayed at Warner Brothers until September of 2012, when he suddenly left the company for personal reasons.<sup>177</sup>

Cohen was replaced at Island Def Jam by Antonio "L.A." Reid, who appointed long-time Def Jam staffer Kevin Liles as president of Def Jam in the spring of 2004. Liles was fired by Reid in August of the same year, and almost immediately joined Cohen at Warner Music Group. Liles departure left a vacancy at Def Jam's president that was ultimately filled by Shawn Carter as part of his retirement from rapping and the "Jay-Z" persona. Carter would only stay president of Def Jam until 2007, when he quit the position to return to rapping full time. In the time since Carter's departure, Def Jam remained a subsidiary of Universal's music group and never returned to the prominence it once held during its founders' tenure.

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<sup>176</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 281.

<sup>177</sup> Randy Lewis. "Lyor Cohen resigns as chairman, CEO of WMG's recorded music division" September 25, 2012. Los Angeles Times. <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/sep/25/entertainment/la-et-ms-lyor-cohen-resign-warner-music-group-20120925>.

Like Motown, much of Def Jam's commercial appeal came from its name and the imagery provoked. Simmons, Rubin, and Def Jam's artists were able to craft a depiction of adamant and unapologetic blackness, while remaining commercially viable and appealing to the mainstream. Despite Simmons' lack of interest in directly helming a record label, his true passion was found in aiding in the creation of a Hip-Hop aesthetic that was equally obtainable and aspirational. Simmons creation of a rap cultural was his ultimate legacy, and he was central in the resulting culture's foundation. Hip-Hop had grown from a youth movement localized in New York City into a bona-fide international phenomenon based upon the message purveyed by Simmons through commercial means.

## CHAPTER SIX: THE ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DECISIONS OF RUSSELL SIMMONS

“Washington: 1963,” the narrator concluded, “Democracy speaks with a mighty voice,” summarizing a newsreel of the March on Washington.<sup>1</sup> Lasting around a minute, the film highlighted the civility and respectability of the demonstrators at the 1963 March on Washington. But at the close of the newsreel, the voice of Charles “Chuck D” Ridenhour came in. “Check this out man,” Ridenhour began, “We rolling this way. That march in 1963? That’s a bit of nonsense. We ain’t rolling like that no more. Matter fact, the young black America? We rolling up with seminars, press conferences, and straight up rallies, am I right?”<sup>2</sup> A crowd cheered Ridenhour’s assessment, echoing the belief that the civility of 1963 was indeed “nonsense.” So began the Spike Lee-directed music video for “Fight the Power.” The video was a tie-in with Lee’s upcoming summer of 1989 release *Do the Right Thing*, which focused on racial issues in America in a post-Civil Rights society. Although the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had been labeled a triumph, there was a great deal of resentment in the African-American community that the movement failed to create lasting social change. Facing increased economic disparity and incidents of racial violence that garnered national attention, there was a growing sentiment among young black Americans that if change were going to come, it would have to be through means less polite than the “nonsense” of 1963. With such volatile subject

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<sup>1</sup> “Fight the Power”. Public Enemy. 1989. Music Video

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

matter, Public Enemy seemed a natural choice to embody the defiance, bravado, and downright anger felt within much of the African-American community.

Yet even as Public Enemy was on the cusp of increased national exposure for their racial audacity, the group's possible success was potentially undermined by one of their own. On May 22, 1989, an interview with member Richard "Professor Griff" Griffin was published in the *Washington Post*. What was supposed to be a discussion of the group's music devolved into an anti-Semitic tirade. Griffin claimed, "Jews are responsible for the wickedness of the world," before launching into a diatribe on the supposed Jewish control over the music business.<sup>3</sup> Griffin further claimed that "Jews have a grip of America," and that they "have a history of killing black men."<sup>4</sup> Although seemingly in line with Public Enemy's penchant for eschewing political correctness, the comments caused a great deal of public outcry. Facing boycotts and picketing, Ridenhour quickly dismissed Griffin from the group in order to preserve its reputation.

But Ridenhour did not make these decisions individually, but instead bowed to the wishes of Russell Simmons, who feared Griffin's comments would undercut the group's popularity. But the May 22<sup>nd</sup> comments were not an isolated incident. Indeed, as Public Enemy's "Minister of Information," Griffin had made a career of making many controversial statements, which were often anti-Semitic. Yet after earlier occurrences, Ridenhour had defended Griffin's beliefs as part of Public

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<sup>3</sup> Stacy Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.: Russell Simmons, Rick Rubin, and the Extraordinary Story of the World's Most Influential Hip Hop Label*. (New York: One World Ballantine, 2005) 170.

<sup>4</sup> Greg Baker. "The Education of Professor Griff" *Miami New Times*. July 11, 1990. <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/the-education-of-professor-griff-6362502>.

Enemy's larger stance as a pro-black musical group. But now with a much larger public platform, and facing protest that could potentially irreversibly damage Public Enemy's commercial appeal, condoning Griffin's comments would no longer suffice. Political defiance was allowed to continue only as long as it did not interfere with profits.

Griffin's dismissal from Public Enemy for his anti-Semitic comments, with much of the group's attractiveness stemming from their political defiance, was indicative of the management and ownership style of Russell Simmons. Simmons could be a conundrum in regards to his running of his enterprises. Simmons was an ardent believer that the rebellion espoused by rap music was the most authentic and genuine in comparison to all other genres. Simmons packaged this rebellion in order to be as appealing as possible for mainstream consumption. Under the helm of Simmons' leadership, Hip-Hop culture spread and became a national force, embodying youth culture for all races. Yet in selling rebellious content to a mainstream audience, Simmons had a very conservative intent. Although he knew rebellious music was immediately lucrative, he sought to expand his music and business empire in order to sustain his wealth should the genre become passé. The economic and cultural decisions made by Simmons as head of Def Jam, as well as his other companies, illuminated the developments in black-owned record labels since the Civil Rights movement, as well as African-American society in general.

Theoretically speaking, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s was a success for African-Americans. Legislation such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1968 Fair Housing Act banned racial discrimination in employment and housing. But the

passage of legislation did not correlate with improved economic prospects.

Particularly devastating was the downturn in manufacturing. For instance, Hip-Hop's birthplace, the South Bronx, alone had lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs, about 40 percent of all jobs in the sector by the late 1970s. This corresponded to a drop in the average per capita income in the borough, falling to \$2,430 a year: 40 percent of the nationwide average and about half of the New York City average.<sup>5</sup> This trend continued in the 1980s, with President Reagan's policy of supply-side or trickle-down economics widening the gap between rich and poor, particularly for families of color. In 1983, the medium black family had one-eleventh the wealth of the medium white family, with this gap doubling by 1989.<sup>6</sup>

Yet despite diminished economic prospects in traditional employment, the music business still appeared lucrative for African-American artists in the early 1980s. Thanks in large part to the success of Motown, black musicians had successfully crossed over into the mainstream. Black acts were able to find success on the pop charts and had become regular atop the *Billboard* charts. By all appearances, black artists had engrained themselves into mainstream consumer culture. However, changes were occurring in the radio industry that had ramifications for the prospects for black musical acts. As national conglomerates such as Clear Channel began to buy stations across the country, programming changed in order to "superserve" specific audiences. In particular, advertisers

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<sup>5</sup> Jeff Chang. *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-hop Generation*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005) 13.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Wolff. *Top Heavy: A Study of the Increasing Inequality of Wealth in America*. (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995). 2, 17-18.



especially desired white male listeners between the ages of twelve and twenty-four. Lee Abrams, a consultant and pioneer of “psychographics,” crafted his “Superstars of Rock and Roll” format, which catered directly to this desired demographic by totally eschewing black genres, such as soul and funk, in favor of white rock acts.<sup>7</sup> The “Superstars” format was difficult for African-American artists, with even black rock groups like Parliament Funkadelic and The Gap Band finding themselves shut out. Black acts could receive airplay on “Urban Contemporary” stations, a catch-all moniker designed to replace “black,” out of fears the racial term could scare away potential advertisers. The programmers of these urban stations during the late 1970s and early 80s tended to favor R&B acts, since they tended to be less defiantly racial.

Black artists also were initially shut out of MTV. MTV had revolutionized the music business, with music videos becoming an essential part of a label’s overall packaging of an artist. Labels could not expect hit records without the exposure and publicity generated by music videos aired on MTV. When the television network began broadcasting in 1981 following a programming schedule akin to the “Superstars” format. This resulted in a color barrier against airing music videos of black artists that lasted until 1983, when Walter Yetnikoff, the president of CBS threatened to pull the music videos from all CBS-signed artists until the network agreed to air Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” music video. Yetnikoff recalled, “I said to MTV, ‘I’m pulling everything we have off the air, all our product. I’m not going to give you any more videos. And I’m going to go public and fucking tell them about the

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<sup>7</sup> Dan Charnas. *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-hop*. New York, NY: New American Library, 2010. 296.

fact you don't want to play music by a black guy.'"<sup>8</sup> The network relented to the external pressure and on March 2, 1983, agreed to add "Billie Jean" to the network's rotation. The addition of "Billie Jean" sparked the inclusion of music videos by more black artists on the channel's programming. By the time of Def Jam's founding in 1984, the network had a small stable of black artists, like Prince, Diana Ross, and Jackson, receiving airtime. In all, although the music business seemingly offered opportunity for African-Americans, the success of MTV and the "Superstars" format limited prospects for black artists.

Yet despite these seemingly dismal prospects, Russell Simmons believed the music business could be lucrative. However, despite aspirations of affluence through his companies, Simmons' initial efforts were shaped by the fact he simply did not have much education or experience before starting Rush Management and Def Jam. By his own admission, Simmons was never a very good student, and quit City College prior to receiving his sociology degree. Likewise, his work experience prior to his music ventures was limited to a short stint in fast food, as well as a few years sporadically selling marijuana and fake cocaine on the streets. Disgruntled Def Jam staffers singled out Simmons limited business knowledge at times. For instance, after a 1988 memo airing his grievances to Rubin and Simmons went unanswered, Def Jam marketing employee Bill Stephney unleashed his frustration in a comic strip entitled "Deftoons." The comic was circulated around Def Jam's office and stated that Rubin and Simmons had, "the combined work experience of ten days at an Orange

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce Swedien. *In the Studio with Michael Jackson* (New York: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2009) 37.

Julius.”<sup>9</sup> To be fair to Simmons, almost everybody in the rap world was very young and making it up as they went along. Indeed, Rubin would later state it was remarkable that any of their music was popular due to the rawness of everyone involved: “The fact we had any success at all is remarkable and a real testament to how good the work was, because everything else was poorly handled-- out of ignorance and inexperience.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, that Simmons could be considered an elder statesman even at the founding of Def Jam in 1984 demonstrated just how young and amateurish everyone else creating rap music was. Simmons’ lack of knowledge meshed well with the naivety of the artists he managed. Although Simmons had a clear vision for mainstream acceptability and profitability, he had no coherent idea as to how they could be reached. The fact that Simmons achieved the level of success he did said more about his drive and persistence than ingenuity or skill as an administrator.

As a result of Simmons’ inexperience, several mistakes were made in the founding of Def Jam. The largest of which was its intermixed and complicated relationship with Rush Management. There was no clear distinction between the two enterprises, with artists and staffers confused as to the line between the two entities. This confusion was further exasperated by the fact that both companies would eventually share the same office building. Beastie Boy member Adam Horovitz recalled, “the Def Jam/Rush thing was weird. It didn’t feel like Def Jam was this *place*. It was the Rush office where there were all these people. The Def Jam

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<sup>9</sup> Charnas *The Big Payback*, 197.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* xvii

office I don't even know...like, where *was* the Def Jam office? It was in the same building, right?"<sup>11</sup> Other members of Def Jam's staff praised the corporate synergy, even previously disgruntled employees, like Stephney, admitted that "Rush and Def Jam achieved workplace diversity in a very natural, unforced way.....this was in stark contrast to the rest of the music world during that period... if you go to the R&B department of a major label, it's all black people, and if you go to the pop and rock department, it's all white people."<sup>12</sup> Stephney would continue, "But you go to Def Jam and...it's this wonderful universe of folks, where these things just don't matter. Everybody just came together based on the music and the culture."<sup>13</sup> Rubin would also praise the blurred lines between companies, not because of the mixture of styles, but because it would give him more contact with an increasingly absentee Simmons: "I was concerned the two of us were spending less and less time together. We built 298 Elizabeth Street for us to live in together 'cause there was always too much to do, and it felt like Russell was less and less available to talk about it."<sup>14</sup> Although confusing, most employees and artists appreciated the close proximity between the companies as a method to foster creativity and a unique corporate environment.

The lack of distinction between Rush Management and Def Jam often confounded other record labels, who were never quite sure of Simmons' motives. In

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<sup>11</sup> Leah Whisler. *Def Jam Recordings: The First 25 Years of the Last Great Record Label*. (New York: Rizzoli, 2011) 90.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 90-94.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

general, other companies wondered whether Simmons was being honest and straightforward with his dealings, or was he trying to play the other labels in order to have potential artists sign to Def Jam. The concerns were warranted, since of the twenty-seven acts signed to Rush Management in 1988, eleven were also on Def Jam.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, with the lone exception of Run-DMC, the most popular acts on Rush Management would inevitably find their way to Def Jam, either formally as a signed artists or informally as touring partners.

However, the closeness between the two companies was a liability when it came to their accounting practices. Most egregiously, both companies shared a set of books for many years. Because of the lack of a solid division between the two companies, it was all but impossible to track sales, income, and other basic accounting practices necessary for a business. This lackadaisical approach to accounting was similarly mirrored in the other business elements of Def Jam and Simmons. Although Bill Stephney would later appreciate the unique corporate culture at Def Jam, in January of 1988, he wrote a letter to Simmons decrying Def Jam's "'fuck it' attitude towards management, administration, signing, spending, hiring, artists, and teamwork."<sup>16</sup> Stephney's accusations were warranted. Def Jam's joint offices with Rush Management did not have enough desks for the entire staff. Additionally, the lack of true job descriptions and titles resulted in a lacking corporate hierarchy. According to Stephney's memo, positions at Def Jam were given

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<sup>15</sup> Stacy Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.: Russell Simmons, Rick Rubin, and the Extraordinary Story of the World's Most Influential Hip Hop Label*. (New York: One World Ballantine, 2005) 147.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 140.

not on merit, but rather for personal reasons, writing: “people are being hired because they were cool, not because they are capable.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite the books being shared with Rush Management, and it being all but impossible to distinguish between the finances of the two companies, the expenses that could be discerned by Def Jam also appalled Stephney. Def Jam had spent \$100,000 recording an album for Tashan, an R&B singer who was one of Simmons’ pet projects, which had only sold 15,000 copies.<sup>18</sup> The company also regularly gave advances and studio funds to artists without receiving assurance that their expenses would be covered by Columbia. For example Simmons once gave his childhood friends Davy D and Larry Green \$18,000 from Def Jam’s coffers for no discernable reason. The two were not musicians or otherwise employees of the label, yet Simmons still gave them funds from the label.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, when the label was given parameters by Columbia, Def Jam would regularly exceed their budgeting. It was not uncommon for a Def Jam album to be tens of thousands of dollars over budget with no songs or singles to otherwise show for it.

Further exasperating Def Jam’s financial woes was that for many years, the company was not receiving its due royalties from sales of their records because of simple oversight. Until the hire of Faith Newman by Lyor Cohen in 1988, none of the songs recorded by Def Jam were properly registered with the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) or Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 140.

<sup>18</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 196.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 196.

Registration in the organizations guaranteed that publishers and writers would receive royalties from each performance of their songs. The process to join either organization was not difficult: it only required the filling out of a membership packet and paying ten dollars annually, but no one in Def Jam's offices knew the procedure or the importance of joining either organization until Newman's arrival. In essence, although Def Jam was popular and making money through record sales, it and its artist were missing out on a significant portion of the money due to them. Coupled with the mismanagement of the money that was received, it was little surprise that Def Jam could be \$17 million in debt at the time of its sale to Polygram in 1994.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps because of his inexperience, or maybe because of his desire to live leisurely, Simmons was prone to delegating to others. While Simmons was ostensibly the leader of Def Jam and had a great deal of control should he choose to wield it, his tenure as president of the company was marked by his giving away his duties to subordinates. Indeed, although Simmons had a great many titles and much power at his businesses, it could be difficult to discern what exactly his work entailed on a daily basis. Although Simmons did indeed have a great deal of power over his enterprises and was ultimately the chief executive, he rarely chose to yield that power within the company, and instead allocated such control to subordinates.

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<sup>20</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 121.

<sup>21</sup> Def Jam's financial documents are housed at Cornell University's Bill Adler archive. Adler, A long time Def Jam publicist, donated his papers, which included financial documents and internal memos from Def Jam and Rush Management as well as press releases and other materials from the label. While most of the archive is available for public viewing, the financial documents are sealed until 2050. Until that time, it can be difficult to speak on either company's finances with any certainty. However, it is evident that mismanagement was rampant.

It was little wonder that in the early 1990s former Def Jam staffer Bill Stephney likened Simmons to Spuds MacKenzie, the canine mascot from Budweiser ads.<sup>22</sup> Simmons kept up a persona of glamour and affluence through his lifestyle and existed as the public face for Def Jam, his other enterprises, and Hip-Hop culture in general, but had little to do with the actual decision making at his companies. For Stephney, Simmons was little more than a mascot who utilized his notoriety for personal gain, but was either unwilling or unable to actually manage Def Jam.

The two recipients of most of Simmons' power were, as he called them, "his Jews:" Rick Rubin and Lyor Cohen. Simmons' initial partnership with Rubin worked because of the different interests of the two men. Prior to his partnership with Rubin, Simmons had to serve as businessperson and musical producer for his acts. Although financially well off thanks to his parents, Rubin had little interest for the commercial side of the record business. Finances and ensuring artists got exposure held limited appeal for Rubin, who was more interested in the creation of songs and their artistic merit, as well as developing artists. The desires of Rubin meshed well with Simmons, who was much more adept at sales and hustling to make sure Def Jam artists made it on the radio. Although Simmons had the capacity to be very interested in artist and musical development, as evidenced by his control over Run-DMC and his R&B pet projects, he was more prone to use his charisma to ensure records were played rather than truly believing in the art. In the most simplistic terms, the partnership allowed Rubin to focus on the art, while Simmons focused on the business.

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<sup>22</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*. 544.



However, this dynamic was flipped with Simmons' relationship and increased reliance upon Lyor Cohen. Despite Simmons' ambition, it was clearly evident that his lack of true business knowledge was impeding the overall financial well being of Def Jam. In Cohen, Simmons found an individual who was more skilled and knowledgeable in the areas in where he lacked skills, namely the conventional abilities needed to run a company day to day. In addition, Cohen was not only fixing the foundational issues in Def Jam, but also bringing in new revenue streams for Def Jam, as well as Rush Management artists, such as his facilitation of Run-DMC's endorsement deal with Adidas and implementation of 1-900 numbers as a new source of income. Cohen could also be tough and abrasive with employees, which suited Simmons well because he rarely liked being the "mean" boss. With Cohen in control over the business side of Def Jam, Simmons was given the freedom to focus on developing new businesses, artists, and the overall Hip-Hop culture. Ironically, this relationship with Cohen mirrored his initial relationship with Rubin, just with the roles reversed.

With both the artistic and business sides of Def Jam given to individuals with more skills and interest, Simmons found himself without many true responsibilities. In essence, Simmons had efficiently delegated himself out of a job. However, Simmons filled the time that might otherwise be spent working with drugs and nightclubs. When Simmons felt the need to take meetings, he typically did so out of his apartment. Simmons also did a great deal of business on his apartment's phone, typically calling radio stations in order to ensure his artists got airtime or Columbia to complain about their lack of publicity. Simmons would also check in on Def Jam

via the phone, typically to talk to Cohen, but would occasionally leave messages for all employees. For instance, in the February of 1991, Simmons left a furious voicemail for Def Jam's promotion department after discovering that the Black Flames single "Watching You" was not receiving the airplay he believed it warranted. In the message, Simmons screamed, "I don't know what the fuck y'all are doing, but if we don't fucking chart this Black Flames record this week, everybody's fired! Everybody!"<sup>23</sup> Despite being an absentee owner, Simmons' threat was not received as hollow, as the promotions team worked overtime calling radio program directors to ensure that the song eventually charted with *Billboard*.

Even once Simmons eschewed his interest in drugs and nightclubs in the early 1990s in favor of creating more businesses, along with Eastern philosophy and yoga, he never took back the control he had delegated. In particular, during Simmons' virtual absence, Cohen had engrained himself deeply within Def Jam's corporate culture. Instead of resisting Cohen's presence in his enterprises, Simmons shifted his perspective on the matter. In essence, Simmons framed himself as a visionary, who would dream up ambitious plans and leave the particulars to Cohen. Simmons himself details this description, as well as Cohen's omnipresence in his ventures, in his autobiography. Simmons stated Cohen initially did "the detail work on all my management-related business and would grow to be an indispensable part of all my music-related activities...[as well as]...all my ventures, from clothing to the Internet and television."<sup>24</sup> Simmons does not exaggerate the relationship; since

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<sup>23</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 187.

following Rubin's departure in 1988, Cohen was indeed either a partner, or major participant, in all of Simmons' business endeavors.

Perhaps none of Simmons' economic decisions embodied his mindset of delegation more than the Rush Associated Label fiasco. Upon becoming sober and taking more of an interest in Def Jam following years of virtual absence, Simmons devised a plan with Cohen in order to aid the label's sagging financial prospects. Faced with the reality of giving a great deal of their record sales to Columbia, in 1990 the duo decided the answer to their problem was to create Rush Associated Labels, or RAL. In essence, Def Jam would be outsourcing their A&R to boutique labels created by already successful Def Jam and Rush Management artists and take a percentage of the successful records akin to the one Columbia took from Def Jam. On paper, the plan would create new profits for Def Jam and allow the company to pay its financial obligations to Columbia. In addition, the creation of RAL gave Cohen, a growing presence in Simmons' empire, a financial stake and ownership in Hip-Hop music since Simmons was unwilling to share his shares in Def Jam.

What resulted was contrary to the initial goals. Labeling RAL a "mistake," Simmons would recall the drain that the enterprise became, "We attempted to replicate the [Columbia] structure with us being the mother label to several smaller ones, but all of them were unsuccessful."<sup>25</sup> Simmons never capped the number of small labels to be under the RAL banner, and the amount surged to over eight in the first year: Fever, Doo Dew Man, No Face, PRO-Division, JMJ, True Blue, DGF, and

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<sup>24</sup> Russell Simmons. *Life and Def: Sex, Drugs, Money, and God*. (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2001) 94.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 111.

Pump Up.<sup>26</sup> Each one of these associated record labels released as many as three albums a year, with every album requiring money for studio time, production, and promotion. In addition, Def Jam was still committed to releasing their own records under their own label, as well as financing the production of these smaller record labels. With so many records flooding the market, even the few hit songs could not recoup the investments made to so many others. Of all the labels created through RAL, only one breakthrough artist was discovered: the group Onyx on JMJ Records, who was soon signed to Def Jam proper after their initial record. In addition, the infrastructure of several smaller labels underneath Def Jam, who was already in a very mixed corporate environment with Rush Management, further confused staffers of the various companies. Def Jam's letterhead changed to include all the smaller labels as well as Def Jam's logo underneath the banner of RAL. This upset staffer and later Def Jam executive Julie Greenwald, who recalled the confusion, "It wasn't sexy...Here I'm working for this great ass company, Def Jam...and then I gotta send them shit with RAL on it. I'm thinking I'm the coolest motherfucker in the world. And my business card says RAL."<sup>27</sup> In addition to the confusion caused by the numerous labels under the RAL banner, the acts that were signed to the labels were not generating the expected revenue. Part of the blame lies upon the shoulders of Cohen. Although Cohen was more than capable in turning around Def Jam's finances and logistics, his ability to discover new talent was severely lacking. As bad as Simmons was in choosing his pet projects, Cohen was even worse. Cohen would

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<sup>26</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 187.

<sup>27</sup> Charnas *The Big Payback.* 208-209.

later lament, "I signed the worst artists, one worse than the last."<sup>28</sup> The labels associated with RAL became bloated and a drain on Def Jam's resources.

By 1994, Def Jam was \$17 million in debt to Columbia, whose parent company Sony was starting to talk with Def Jam's few profitable artists, like LL Cool J and Public Enemy, about signing directly with Sony, bypassing Def Jam entirely. This move infuriated Simmons, who later stated, "Sony was preparing to rape me of my company...because we were a small entity distributed by a major corporation, we were never really able to pay [Public Enemy] or [LL Cool J] in a competitive way. We paid them more than an indie...but less than if they were signed to Sony directly."<sup>29</sup> Sony also discussed buying Simmons out completely, but ultimately decided because of his high profile thanks in part to the success of *Def Comedy Jam* and his other enterprises. Still, Simmons sought out a partnership with another distributor, ultimately signing a deal with Polygram for \$33 million in exchange for 50 percent of the company later in 1994. RAL and its associated labels were disbanded shortly thereafter, ending Def Jam's first experiment with outsourcing its Artist & Repertoire. Additionally, a part of the deal with Polygram officially dissolved Rush Management, ending the long-time intermixing and corporate confusion between it and Def Jam.<sup>30</sup>

Def Jam would return once more to the concept of small labels underneath its larger parent umbrella with more success in the late 1990s. But these boutique

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<sup>28</sup> Leah Whisler. *Def Jam Recordings: The First 25 Years of the Last Great Record Label*. (New York: Rizzoli, 2011) 124.

<sup>29</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*. 112.

<sup>30</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 245.

labels differed from their RAL predecessors since they were fewer in number and were given to more capable individuals. For instance, of the seven RAL labels, only one was helmed by a producer or individual otherwise familiar with the behind the scenes necessities of making music: Prince Paul's Dew Doo Man Records. Prince Paul's background as a producer did not help Dew Doo Man's sales, which faltered akin to the bulk of other RAL labels. This contrasted with the associated labels created by Def Jam in the late 90s. For instance, Irving "Irv Gotti" Lorenzo, had already proven himself as an expert in A&R and signing new talent to Def Jam prior to being given his own label: Murder, Inc. Records. The founders of Roc-A-Fella Records were a similar circumstance. Although they had limited music business experience prior to their deal with Def Jam, they had shown themselves capable of generating publicity and putting out an album on their own merits. Plus, Roc-A-Fella did not have to seek out a budding artist to sign to their label in order to bolster its prospects, since Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter was one-third of its ownership. In short, the labels Def Jam signed distribution deals with in the late 1990s differed from those of the RAL era because they were better equipped to produce hit records right off the bat and did not require the start-up costs and time needed for artist development. Simmons and the Def Jam leadership had learned from the RAL fiasco and applied those lessons in order to create a much more stable and profitable label.

Aside from Def Jam and Rush Management, Simmons founded a number of companies that fed into his vision of Hip-Hop culture. His first major venture outside of the music business was Phat Farm, a clothing line founded by Simmons in 1992. The move into fashion was not surprising, given Simmons' penchant for meticulous

control over his artists' attire, as well as making sure audiences could copy the styles of their favorite rappers. Simmons also admitted, "my interest in six-foot, long-legged women had a lot to do with the start of the Phat Farm clothing line."<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Cross Colours and Karl Kani were successful Hip-Hop inspired clothing lines, and demonstrated that a market existed for designs that replicated the culture's style. Simmons initially partnered with Mark Beguda, owner of a Soho clothing boutique, to aid him in breaking into a business with which he was unfamiliar. Although well acquainted with fashion and design, Simmons was admittedly ignorant with the process of finding manufacturers and ensuring the product was delivered to stores. Simmons started Phat Farm with half a million dollars of capital in 1992, and it took the company six years to make a profit. However, thanks in large part to Simmons pressing his artists to wear Phat Farm fashions, the clothing line's notoriety increased. In time, Phat Farm would grow dramatically in revenue. Although it took the company until 1998 to make a profit, by 2001, it was generating \$225 million in wholesale revenue.<sup>32</sup>

Phat Farm might have been the most visible of Simmons' non-music related businesses, but they were far from his only venture. For instance, founded in 1996, Rush Advertising company produced commercials for Coca-Cola, ESPN, HBO, and even the Democratic National Convention before merging with the Deutsch Agency to form dRush in 1999. His Simmons-Lathan Media group, a joint venture with producer/director Stan Lathan, found television success with the *Def Comedy* and

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<sup>31</sup> Simmons. *Life and Def*. 151.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 161.

*Def Poetry Jam* franchises, as well as in reality television with *Run's House*, which starred Simmons' brother Run and family. In 2003, Simmons launched UniRush, whose "Rush Card," a prepaid Visa debit card he claimed was designed to help "those that found themselves left behind by traditional banks [to find] an on-ramp to better financial services."<sup>33</sup> Simmons also started community affairs organizations, such as his Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation in 1994 and the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network in 2001. There were also less successful ventures, such as his Rush Modeling Agency, Rush Broadcasting, *OneWorld* magazine, and multiple film production companies.

Simmons claimed these companies embodied a Hip-Hop mindset, which he defined as "modern mainstream young urban American culture."<sup>34</sup> With such a broad and flexible definition, Simmons could market a product as being "Hip-Hop" despite its not being really all that different from mainstream products. For instance, aside from the Rush labeling, there was no difference between a Rush Card and any other Visa prepaid debit card. However, because of the Rush name, and Simmons' persona as a Hip-Hop mogul, the product supposedly transcended its identity and became a part of the Hip-Hop culture. While Rush Advertising's commercials for Coca-Cola featured Method Man and Mary J. Blige, which endeared it to Hip-Hop adherents, the soda advertised was the same as in a traditional commercial. Additionally, Simmons' ownership of these companies was marked by the same level of delegation to subordinates found in Def Jam and Rush

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<sup>33</sup> "About Us" Rush Card homepage. Accessed January 16, 2016. <https://www.rushcard.com/about-us>.

<sup>34</sup> Simmons. *Life and Def*. 4.



Management. Simmons might have been the face of the companies, and a large part of their commercial appeal, but he had little to do with their actual running.

Despite Simmons' ambivalence towards the administrative elements of his businesses, he typically held the most sustained interest in managing his artists. Depending on Simmons' attitude towards the individual artist, he could either be micro-managing their every detail or completely detached and disinterested. In general, Simmons paid more attention to his acts earlier in his career. Acts such as Run-DMC and Whodini tended to hold more of Simmons' attention than later Def Jam and Rush Management signees. Part of this level of attention is due simply to the fact that Simmons had fewer acts to manage when Rush Management and Def Jam were small companies and he could spend more time with them. However, regardless of the number of acts signed to Simmons, certain groups held more of his attention.

Of all the groups signed to Def Jam and Rush Management, Simmons by far spent the most attention on detail with Run-DMC. Simmons made sure his brother's group received the most exposure and positive press among all of his early acts. Likewise, Simmons paid an enormous amount of consideration to insure Run-DMC received the best beats and was insistent about tweaking even minor details of their records. He also actually made Run-DMC's earlier records and was more intimately involved in the recording process than his other acts. The reason for Simmons' attention was manifold, but was due in large part to the fact that his brother was a member. Although Simmons was not the performer on stage, nor was he part of the face of Run-DMC, he was considered by the group as an integral member and on the

same level as everyone else. Indeed, Run would later claim there were five members in Run-DMC: “Run, DMC, Jam Master Jay, Russell Simmons, and God.”<sup>35</sup>

Although Simmons was interested in the minute details of Run-DMC, they were not the only group at Rush Management or Def Jam records to receive such intense scrutiny and hands-on attention from Simmons. The most notable was Oran “Juice” Jones, an R&B act of middling success signed to Def Jam who Simmons was utterly convinced would be a star, despite limited commercial success. Simmons believed R&B would become a steadier base for Def Jam’s future viability than Hip-Hop. Although Simmons never publically came out to say rap music was a fad, his decision in trying to ensure the visibility of Jones and other R&B acts demonstrate he at least felt the same way as music executives in charge of programming of black acts at larger labels in seeing Hip-Hop as limited in commercial scope.

However, as hands on as Simmons was with Run-DMC, Oran “Juice” Jones, and his pet R&B projects, he was equally distant and a non-factor with the appearance and musicality of other Def Jam and Rush Management acts, even some of his companies’ biggest and earliest stars. The prime example of this neglect was the Beastie Boys, one of Def Jam’s first crossover successes. The group was almost entirely under the direction of Rick Rubin, who discovered the band, convinced them to give up their instruments and punk rock in order to solely focus on rap, programmed their beats, and was even considered the group’s fourth member for a

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<sup>35</sup> God’s inclusion in the group has not been that well documented, aside from Run’s later transformation to Reverend Run and the high amount of religious undertones on their 1993 album “Down with the King.” Indeed, at the time of the recording of “Down with the King,” DMC recalls Run’s desire to change their stage names to “Reverend Run and Deacon DMC.” Needless to say, such a switch was never made. Ronin Ro. *Raising Hell: The Reign, Ruin, and Redemption of Run-D.M.C. and Jam Master Jay*. (New York: Amistad, 2005) 264.

time. The only recorded instance where Simmons utilized his authority over the group was early on when Simmons suggested the Beastie Boys stop dressing in “red sweat suits with red Pumas to match, trying to look hip-hop” and instead wear jeans and t-shirts more in line with their usual attire.<sup>36</sup> Aside from this instance, Simmons seemed content to let Rubin take point over the group’s direction. Although Simmons was clearly enamored of the Beastie Boy’s popularity and sought to get them as much exposure as possible, he did not feel the need to micro-manage them to the extent of Run-DMC and his pet projects.

Despite being uninterested or unwilling to dictate every element of the Beastie Boys’ persona, Simmons was proactive in booking and promoting the band. Simmons’ was instrumental in getting the Beastie Boys booked to open for Madonna on her tour. Although the antics of the Beastie Boys initially did not mesh well with the predominantly young white female fans of Madonna, the exposure garnered from the tour greatly increased the band’s notoriety. Simmons picked the Beastie Boys among all his other acts because he figured they would benefit the most from the publicity, hoping that white audiences would respond best to a white rap act. Despite being driven to insure the Beastie Boys were in front of a large audience, Simmons did little to curtail the group’s limited stage presence and brash conduct. Unlike Run-DMC, where Simmons strictly kept control over even the minutest details, the Beastie Boys were under the direction of Rubin. Simmons recalled their behavior on tour: “They used to go out in front of Madonna’s fans and run around onstage and lip-sync. They’d be joking and falling over while the lip syncing was

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<sup>36</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*. 92.

supposed to be going on...they used to do things like that to irritate the crowd.”<sup>37</sup>

The irritation of the crowd was not part of the innate behavior of the group’s members, but rather was greatly encouraged by Rubin, who believed a purposefully upsetting performance would cause the audience to react strongly to the group. Rubin likened this sort of behavior to professional wrestling, wherein the villainous wrestler would needle the crowd into booing him through unscrupulous behavior as part of the overall spectacle. As Rubin would later explain, “I really loved wrestling and the idea of the bad guys coming and getting the audience excited and throwing stuff....I knew it was funny and ridiculous...and ultimately entertaining. That was the goal- to be entertaining.”<sup>38</sup> Adam Horovitz remembered Rubin coaching the group to be purposefully antagonistic to the pop audience. Rubin would say, “You gotta go out there and tell these people that they can burn this house down when we leave because we’re the Beastie Boys and this is *our* show.’ I was like, ‘That’s really funny. I’m gonna go out there and do it.’”<sup>39</sup> But Horovitz continued that Rubin’s suggestions did not pan out in the group’s favor, “Every night it was these parents with their little kids dressed up like Madonna. They were like... ‘Cut it out. Stop cursing at my kids.’”<sup>40</sup> Critics were similarly not amused by the Beastie Boys. In the June 22, 1985, issue of *Melody Maker*, David Fricke labeled the Beastie Boys’ as “three foul mouthed white rap punks, who pack in more X-rated giggles in their 20-minute spot with just a few toilet jokes, a ridiculous dance called the Jerry Lewis and two turntables

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<sup>37</sup> Simmons. *Life and Def*. 93.

<sup>38</sup> Whisler. *Def Jam Recordings*, 80.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

spinning crunchy heavy metal rhythm tracks.”<sup>41</sup> The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* similarly panned the group, stating the band “got off to a bad start...by making the pro-Madonna audience feel like a swarm of hillbillies.”<sup>42</sup>

But Rubin’s gambit ultimately paid off with the Beastie Boys. Although the group was booed and jeered throughout the tour with Madonna, their profile was raised high enough to get airplay on MTV and increased record sales. This mindset of letting the Beastie Boys stay under the direction of Rubin worked well as long as the group was with Def Jam. Indeed, it was only after Rubin’s attention was placed more on other groups that the band drifted away from the label and ultimately left for Capital.

Despite its later inclusion as a subsidiary of a large multi-national conglomerate, Def Jam was able to stay in business for fifteen years as an independent record label. Likewise, although Simmons and other Def Jam executives were not the most knowledgeable about business affairs, they still managed to keep the company afloat and produce very popular records. Even when major financial mistakes were made, such as the failure to register with the ASCAP and BMI or the RAL fiasco, the label was able to survive mainly because of its image and the sheer tenacity of Simmons. Although he tended to eschew the actual labor of running a business, Simmons aided Def Jam by generating commercial interest in the Hip-Hop culture through his alternate business endeavors and even his lifestyle. If nothing

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<sup>41</sup> David Fricke. ‘Immaterial Girl’ *Melody Maker*, June 22, 1985.  
<http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/defjam/exhibition/rockhard/index.html>

<sup>42</sup> Gene Stout. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. April 11, 1985.  
<http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/defjam/exhibition/rockhard/index.html>

else, Simmons was steadfast in his belief that Hip-Hop culture was mainstream youth culture, and he marketed it in such a way as to garner as much exposure as possible. The fact that Def Jam was able to survive through such financial ineptitude demonstrates how pervasive of an appeal Simmons was able to give Hip-Hop culture and his enterprises. Although Def Jam's business decisions were suspect and often times detrimental, it still remained that Simmons generated interest in a lifestyle, and commoditized that lifestyle into a product ready for consumer consumption.

As big as the Beastie Boys, Run-DMC, and other acts associated with Simmons were, Public Enemy had the capability to become even bigger. The group tapped into a vein of resentment that was strong among young members of the African-American community in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although the Civil Rights Movement had been heralded as a success with civil and voting rights legislation, school desegregation, and other victories, many black young people felt nothing had really changed. The rise of new right conservatism, born out of a backlash against the various social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and symbolized by the election of Ronald Reagan, threatened to erase the accomplishments made. Trickle-down economics and tax cuts resulted in local governments ending programs to aid citizens of color obtain financial equality, such as the anti-poverty Community Development Block Grant program, public service jobs, and job training. Additionally, the prevalence of white flight further deteriorated the tax base of cities already strapped for revenue. White flight also affected education, which was returning to a segregated state despite legal victories

for desegregation. For instance, a 1993 Harvard study on the rate of school segregation and poverty found sixty percent of black and Latino students attended predominantly minority schools. This number was consistent with white students, who the study found on average were enrolled in schools that were eighty percent white.<sup>43</sup>

Along with the increased separation came events of racial violence in the 1980s that garnered national attention. New York City, the home of Hip-Hop, was the location for several of them. In the Gravesend area of Brooklyn, a group of white youths chased a group of black transit workers and beat thirty-four-year old William Turks to death.<sup>44</sup> In 1986, Michael Griffith, a twenty-three-year old Trinidadian immigrant, was killed by a passing car after fleeing from a white mob that had severely beaten him when his car broke down in the community of Howard Beach in Queens.<sup>45</sup> Fifteen-year-old Tawana Brawley claimed in 1987 that she was the victim of a gang rape by six white men, who left her in a trash bag with racial slurs and feces covering her body.<sup>46</sup> Faced with such incidents of violence, there was a groundswell of resistance brewing among the young black people. And Public Enemy seemed primed to lead the charge.

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<sup>43</sup> Gary Orfield. "The Growth of Segregation in American Schools: Changing Patterns of Separation and Poverty Since 1968." A Report of the Harvard Project on School Desegregation to the National School Boards Association. 1993. 20,29.

<sup>44</sup> Barbara Basler. "Black Man is Killed by Mob in Brooklyn: Attack Called Racial." The New York Times. June 23, 1982. <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/23/nyregion/black-man-is-killed-by-mob-in-brooklyn-attack-called-racial.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Samuel G. Freedman. "In Howard Beach, Pride and Fear in a 'Paradise'" The New York Times. December 22, 1986. <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/23/nyregion/in-howard-beach-pride-and-fear-in-a-paradise.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Esther Iverem. "Bias Cases Fuel Anger Of Blacks." The New York Times. December 13, 1987. <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/14/nyregion/bias-cases-fuel-anger-of-blacks.html>.

Part of Public Enemy's centrality in this looming revolution was due to the fact that there seemed to be a power vacuum in regards to national black leadership. The post-Civil Rights movement had not produced a central figure, like Martin Luther King or Malcolm X, able to serve as singular head. Various civil rights organizations still existed, but they were not unified behind a single issue or leader. Theoretically, inheritors of the 1960s movement were active in the 1980s, but they were never able to solidify their position as heads of this new resistance. Although Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Louis Farrakhan, and others had national recognition, they were never able to parley this exposure into a unified collation of African-Americans capable of combating the racial issues of the 1980s. In this void of leadership, socially and politically conscious rap was a uniting factor among the dispersed African-American interests. If black America could no longer rally behind a leader, perhaps Hip-Hop was a legitimate method by which the African-American community could unify against serious racial issues. Of all the rap acts prevalent during the 1980s, Public Enemy was the best poised to become leaders of this new movement. Their defiant pro-black and Afrocentric imagery resonated with their audience, who felt the group was capable of being such a unifying force. Yet the reason behind Public Enemy's prevalence was the actions of Russell Simmons. Public Enemy had not come to public awareness by their own devices, rather it was Simmons who ensured the group garnered publicity. Public Enemy fit into Simmons' vision in the marketability of black rebellion to not just an African-American audience, but a mainstream audience as well. Although many of Simmons' economic decisions were made out of ignorance and potentially disastrous for his enterprises,



his cultural decisions for Def Jam, Rush Management, and his artists were made more purposefully.

Simmons had a fairly consistent idea for how he viewed Hip-Hop culture and its place within the wider society. According to Simmons, “my life has largely been about promoting the anger, style, aggression, and attitude of urban America to a worldwide audience.”<sup>47</sup> In seeking to sell this rebellion to consumers, Simmons crafted a legacy for not only his companies, but also for himself. The manner by which Simmons marketed himself, in addition to his record label and Hip-Hop culture, impacted the perception of how black business people are perceived and set new exceptions for aspiring moguls.

Simmons was obsessed with getting his groups mainstream exposure by any means necessary. In particular, most of Simmons’ early time in marketing Def Jam and Rush Management acts was spent in an attempt to link their image to the level of youth rebellion prevalent in the mainstream. In essence, Simmons believed once white teen-aged audiences saw his rap acts, they would believe them to be a more authentic embodiment of their angst than rock and roll acts. Simmons felt that rock and roll music’s aesthetic, although founded by “black men who wore fly suits, had their hair slick, and didn’t give a fuck,” had changed too much since becoming prevalent in the mainstream culture.<sup>48</sup> In his autobiography, Simmons bemoaned how Rock “became about rebellion for rebellion’s sake. It was no longer about getting money and looking fly; it became about taking drugs and wearing dirty

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<sup>47</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*. xiii

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

jeans.”<sup>49</sup> What is intriguing about this description by Simmons is how it contends that losing interest in one’s appearance and making money equated to a loss of authenticity. At least for Simmons, the pursuit of profit and a flashy appearance was the most genuine form of artistic expression. However, Simmons believed Hip-Hop embodied a more pure form of the rebellion that had been lost in the development of rock music:

“[Rappers] do all the things rock stars used to do and they do even more dangerous, outrageous things...[a rapper] is doing it because he has a serious reason- discrimination, personal anger, or ghetto conditions. And on top of all that, a rap star wants to make money and enjoy success, and is fearless in doing it. The result is the kind of attitude of authentic rebellion that rock was always supposed to have.”<sup>50</sup>

Simmons also found rap’s potential for rebellion was increased through the universality of its content: “Even though rap was born in the ghetto, it addresses issues a lot of kids across America (and the world) are dealing with-- anger, alienation, hypocrisy, sex, drugs. All the basics.”<sup>51</sup> In essence, Simmons believed rap held an immense appeal to a mainstream audience through its message of rebellion, a message he felt was more authentic than that found in rock music. Furthermore, Simmons felt that an artist being blunt about their desire to become wealthy would increase their authenticity. Ultimately, unlike Gordy, who believed financial

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

sustainability would come through projecting an image of black respectability, Simmons held the long-term success for his endeavors would come through presenting his image of “authentic” black rebellion to as large of an audience as possible. This inconsistent vision of race was part of Simmons’ flexibility. This fluidity allowed Simmons not to narrow the audience of this rebellious music to a single race.

By all accounts, white persons made up about 75 to 80 percent of the consumers of Def Jam and Rush Management artists’ records. But Simmons would initially claim that white persons were not his targeted audience. Instead, he claimed his actual target was the people he called the “tastemakers.” Simmons iterated the identity of these tastemakers was not dependent upon race, but rather upon their ability to generate subsequent sales from persons emulating them. According to Simmons, “the people on line outside the club that second day don’t mean shit....they were on line because they’d hear it was cool from someone who’d been there the first day. It’s the first-day audience that’s the core-- that’s who you must be sensitive to.”<sup>52</sup> Simmons sought to justify his actions by stating once the tastemakers deem a product cool, the rest of world would follow their example. Although not publically disparaging white persons for buying his records, he claimed that the widespread popularity of Def Jam and its artist was not due to his actions in marketing, but rather that the right listeners convinced the rest of the consumer public through their “coolness.”

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

Early on, Simmons believed that Run-DMC held the most appeal of all his acts and sought to have them marketed to as wide of an audience as possible. Simmons insisted that the band was a rock group, not just a rap group, in order to generate mainstream exposure. Even though Simmons felt rock was less authentic in its depiction than rebellion, he recognized its popularity and hoped to parley it into coverage for the group. This concept was prevalent in the imagery of “Rock Box,” the group’s first music video, as well as one of the first Hip-Hop videos to receive airplay on MTV. The video begins with a scholar, humorously portrayed by comedian Irwin Corey, lecturing on the history of rap music much to the chagrin of a young white male appearing to be around eight or nine years of age.<sup>53</sup> As the professor continues, images of Run-DMC driving to the Danceteria, a punk rock club in New York City, are intermixed. Eventually, Run-DMC emerges from the car, fully breaking off the professor’s monologue, as the boy nods his head in approval. The rest of the video showed the group performing alongside guitars, keyboards, and other rock instruments in front of a racially mixed crowd. The message purveyed was clear: Run-DMC was marketed as equivalent to popular rock music. This is continued in the group’s next major video, “King of Rock.”<sup>54</sup> This video begins with Run and DMC arriving at the fictitious “Museum of Rock and Roll,” before being stopped at the entrance by a security guard. The guard informs the duo that they do not belong at such a museum. However, the guard is cut off by a defiant DMC, who begins the song with a bold “I’m the king of rock, there is none higher.” The rest of the video

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<sup>53</sup> *Rock Box*. Perf. Run-DMC. Profile, 1984. Music Video.

<sup>54</sup> *King of Rock*. Perf. Run-DMC. Profile, 1985. Music Video.

portrays the group wrecking the museum's exhibits. Although the imagery of young black men destroying the artifacts of Rock and Roll could be construed as violent and oppositional, the video's meaning was more of inclusion. If Rock and Roll was to be the embodiment of teenaged angst and rebellion, Run-DMC was demonstrating with their destruction that they were an equal personification. This was also felt in Run-DMC's most popular video, "Walk this Way" with the rock group Aerosmith.<sup>55</sup> The video started with the two groups on separate sides of a wall with their respective music interrupting the other's practice session. The video continued with the wall being destroyed and the two groups performing together in front of an arena audience made up primarily of white people. The imagery of this video was even more blatant: Run-DMC and Aerosmith had knocked down the walls between races and genres before emerging in front of an adoring crowd. By portraying Run-DMC as a rock group, Simmons hoped to endear the group to the white mainstream audience and ensure profitability.

Another manner by which Simmons sought to increase Run-DMC's notoriety was through the accessibility of their image. Prior to Run-DMC, most rappers and Hip-Hop groups dressed in a manner akin to disco with garish colors, leather, and excessive zippers being part of the norm. In contrast, Simmons was insistent to make Run-DMC's clothing, as well as their overall image, sparse in order to build the perception of realism. In doing so, Simmons believed the group would endear themselves to a core black audience that would expand to the white mainstream. Simmons expands upon this point in his autobiography: "Some of the artists back

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<sup>55</sup> *Walk This Way*. Perf. Run-DMC featuring Aerosmith. Profile. 1986. Music Video

then looked down at rap as such a ghetto phenomenon that they felt the need to tone it down and make it slicker for the masses. What Rick and I preached was ‘Fuck being acceptable! Take that ghetto attitude and shove it down their throats.’”<sup>56</sup> Unlike Gordy, who sought to market an image of black respectability in order to ensure the success of his Motown artists, Simmons was in the business of selling rebellion. In order to best sell this rebellion, Simmons needed to make sure Run-DMC looked the part. This is why Simmons eschewed the group wearing the “cowboy boots, feathers, and studded jackets” common with other rap groups in favor of “leather suits with velour hats and shell-toe Adidas shoes,” a look that Simmons claimed: “that’s a ghetto uniform, not a costume.”<sup>57</sup> Simmons’ emphasis on Run-DMC’s attire would culminate in a \$1 million dollar endorsement deal with Adidas. This deal further increased the exposure for Run-DMC and other Rush Management artists.

Although Simmons was central in cultivating the look and exposure of Run-DMC, he left most of the decisions for Def Jam’s artists to Rick Rubin. Indeed, much of Def Jam’s legacy as an embodiment of authentic black rebellion was due to the presence and centrality of Rick Rubin. It was Rubin, not Simmons who founded the label and even gave it the moniker “Def Jam.” Likewise, it was Rubin who had to convince Simmons of the merits of forming such a label, since Simmons was more interested in having his own imprint at a larger music conglomerate and believed his affiliation with an independent record label would undermine his negotiations

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<sup>56</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*. 70.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 69-70.

with EMI Records. Additionally, it was Rubin who crafted the sound for most of Def Jam's early artists and continued its emphasis on rap music after Simmons had all but abandoned the genre believing R&B would ultimately led the label to more success. In these and other circumstances, it can be argued that Rubin, a Jewish kid from an affluent section of Long Island, was more important to Def Jam's ghetto aesthetic than Simmons.

These issues were not lost on early critics of Def Jam, who were keenly aware of the importance of a white man in this supposedly black music label. A 1985 article in *RockAmerica* magazine by Carolyn K. Martin entitled "Def Jam: Black Music for White People or White Music for Black People?" explored this dynamic. The article was unique in that it does not mention Simmons at all or his role as co-owner of Def Jam. Instead, the article claimed that Rubin's partner at Def Jam was Georg Drakoulis. Drakoulis, a college friend of Rubin, was indeed a part of Def Jam, but served the label as an unpaid and unaccredited intern instead of the co-proprietor as asserted in the article. Despite downplaying Simmons' involvement with the label, the article mentioned the commercial appeal of the rebellion displayed by Def Jam and its associated artists. As Rubin told Martin: "people like me- coming from a wealthy family in Long Island, or like Run-DMC whose father runs a school district and drives a Mercedes- are thrilled by the idea of being gangsters because it's further removed from us. It's really cool to be the bad guy, as long as you are making

that choice.”<sup>58</sup> Rubin continued by acknowledging the racial issue in the music business with his future plans: “I’ll be co-producing the new Run-DMC...and the Beastie Boys’ album. It’s great because it gives us the opportunity to call everyone racist: the white stations that won’t play Run-DMC, the black stations that won’t play the Beastie Boys.”<sup>59</sup> When asked about the future of rap music, Rubin took a page out of Simmons’ book and turned to self-promotion: “The future of rap music is quite simply ME – me and Def Jam, Rush Productions, all the artists on our roster. That is the future of rap music!”<sup>60</sup> Although Simmons was not mentioned in the article, which gave the impression that the future of rap music as solely in the hands of a young Jewish braggadocio, Rubin was giving the same talking points utilized by Simmons. Rubin highlighted Def Jam’s authentic rebellion, as well as equated their groups to rock acts. Simmons and other artists reacted much more harshly to the 1986 article in the *Village Voice* that claimed Rubin was the true king of rap than to Rubin’s centrality in *RockAmerica*’s telling of the Def Jam narrative. This was possibly because *RockAmerica* was a much smaller publication, or perhaps Simmons felt its presumably white readership would be more interested in listening to Def Jam if they were under the impression the label was helmed by a white man.

From a creative standpoint, Rubin did indeed run Def Jam at its onset. He was the primary producer and brought in profitable acts from a variety of genres. While Simmons was ineffective in turning Oran “Juice” Jones and his other R&B pet

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<sup>58</sup> Carolyn K. Martin. “Def Jam: Black Music for White People or White Music for Black People?” *RockAmerica*. June 1985.

<http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/defjam/exhibition/simmonsrush/index.html>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*



projects into superstars, Rubin succeeded with LL Cool J and the Beastie Boys in rap, as well as Slayer in the heavy metal genre. Yet, as important as Rubin was in crafting Def Jam's initial sound and culture, he only remained with the company until 1988, four years after his initial partnership with Simmons. Despite having a great deal of initial creative control over Def Jam and its artists, Rubin left the label due to resentment over Simmons' reliance upon Cohen and a growing disenchantment with the Hip-Hop genre. Although Rubin was the guiding influence over Def Jam's earliest artists, his departure did not equate a downturn for Def Jam's popularity or artistic expression. Indeed, artists like Public Enemy reached their peak of popularity only after Rubin's departure. Despite Rubin's immense early influence on Def Jam, it was not long lasting. Although Simmons was an absentee owner for most of Def Jam's existence as an independent record label, he remained a presence and a guiding force, albeit a hands-off one, until the label's sale to Universal in 1999.

As much as Simmons embodied black entrepreneurialism and the persuasive nature of American capitalism to cross racial boundaries, there was a major element of Simmons' persona that ran seemingly contrary to such ideals. Following his abandonment of nightclub living and drug use, Simmons became incredibly taken with Yoga in particular, and Eastern Philosophy in general. Since his sobriety, Simmons made a regular habit of daily meditation, veganism, and general adherence to Eastern religious beliefs. Granted, Simmons' beliefs are not entirely conventional, and have elements of his personality embedded. For instance, Simmons claimed that he posted pictures of Louis Farrakhan, Glenda the Good Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*, and rapper DMX on his yoga altar since he found they represented the

personification of goodness in the world.<sup>61</sup> By all accounts, Simmons' devotion appeared to be genuine and continues to this day.<sup>62</sup> Even the final chapter of Simmons' autobiography is filled with platitudes designed to send the reader towards better mental health and clarity.

Yet Simmons' adherence to Yoga and the like run concurrent to his intense capitalistic streak. Simmons launched numerous enterprises, such as Phat Farm, Rush Productions, Rush Communications, Rush Modeling, and a whole host of others since turning to these beliefs. Although his belief system would seemingly run contrary to seeking material possessions and financial gain, if anything, Yoga and meditation made Simmons more materialistic. He became more prolific than ever in his desire to earn as much money as possible through starting several businesses. Simmons also became a spokesperson for non-profits, such as PETA, yet in their ads, was usually clearly wearing clothing from his own lines, as judged by the prevalent Phat Farm logos. In essence, Simmons was utilizing the same medium to advertise his products, as well as bring awareness to animal cruelty. This also applied to Simmons' efforts as a political organizer, in which Simmons sought to organize the same consumer base to whom he pandered his wares, into engaging in civic behavior and the like. Additionally, Simmons' definition of "Eastern Philosophy" was very broad. Aside from Yoga, Simmons never gave particulars as to what disciplines he followed, instead cherry-picking whatever elements he deemed

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<sup>61</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*. 202.

<sup>62</sup> Simmons was not the only Def Jam founder to turn to Non-Western Philosophy. Following his departure from the label in 1988, Rubin became increasingly devoted to Buddhism and Shamanistic elements of faith. However, Rubin has not been as willing to commodify his faith as Simmons.

useful. Simmons' religious beliefs were broad primarily because most of Simmons' other beliefs were similarly broad.

Although such behavior might seem hypocritical and has been labeled as “Compa\$\$onate Capitalism” by Ta-Nehisi Coates, it was not against Simmons' nature.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, most of Simmons' actions as owner of Def Jam fit into this sort of mentality. Simmons could be equal parts over-bearing micromanager and absentee owner. He could both champion Hip-Hop culture, yet believe his long term financial viability came through R&B Music. He was willing to sell rebellion and defiance against the status quo, yet purposefully made sure his acts had mainstream appeal and continually courted white audiences. In essence, the conflicted and seemingly duplicitous nature of Simmons actually accurately embodied the pervasive nature of capitalism. Once blackness and rebellion was commodified by Simmons and sold as a product for consumer consumption, its ultimate nature was that of a product like any other. Additionally, since there was a power vacuum in regards to post-Civil Rights black leadership, there was no authority to decide what did and did not constitute an act of rebellion. In such an environment, the purchasing of a record could be considered a rebellious activity, even though it ultimately was simply buying a product. Simmons had to toe the line between advertising his products as embodying the “black” aesthetic, since that was a major element of its appeal to the mainstream, yet not limit his consumers by allowing behaviors would narrow his

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<sup>63</sup> S. Craig Watkins. *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005) 156-157.

products to a single race. In essence, Simmons' wares needed to be "pro-black," but not "anti-white."

Perhaps no other action made by Simmons demonstrated this balance between economic and cultural considerations than his decision to boot Griffin from Public Enemy. Prior to Public Enemy's surge in popularity, Simmons had a hands-off approach to the group's musical direction. Indeed, Simmons would later admit he initially did not find the group very impressive, and only signed them to Def Jam after Rick Rubin insisted.<sup>64</sup> Once the group was signed to Def Jam, they resisted the tweaks the label sought to make to their image. Carlton "Chuck D" Ridenhour presented Public Enemy to Def Jam as a complete package, which included a paramilitary drill team called the "Security of the 1<sup>st</sup> World" or "S1Ws" and William "Flavor Flav" Drayton, a clock-wearing, minstrel-esque mascot for the group. Rubin found the S1Ws acceptable, but totally rejected the inclusion of Drayton, the imagery of which he found too racial to make the group successful. However, Ridenhour was insistent, and demanded Drayton remained in the group. Rubin acquiesced, seeing that the potential of Public Enemy and their personal chemistry could only be tampered with, not improved, through meddling. Likewise Simmons, who had low expectations for the group, tried his best to make sure they were properly booked, but otherwise did not feel they merited his involvement.

However, once Public Enemy became popular, Simmons began to sing their praises, as well as insert himself into the narrative of their success. He would later state: "I knew what they were about, but everyone might not get it. I wanted a story

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<sup>64</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*. 97.

to tell. I'm not even sure if the story was more about my framing them that way to like them in my head or my getting everybody else to be rebellious *for a reason*.”<sup>65</sup> He would also publically state that Public Enemy was his “favorite group” after the success of “Rebel Without a Pause.”<sup>66</sup> Simmons would also lavish praise upon Ridenhour following Public Enemy’s commercial success, claiming “Chuck D was a guy I liked from the first time I met him...He spent all his time looking for new sounds and ways to make old sounds feel new...It was a point of view similar to what we’d been doing with Run-DMC.”<sup>67</sup> It was intriguing that Simmons tempered his highest compliment of Ridenhour by likening it to his own work with Run-DMC. But it fit into Simmons’ view of Public Enemy once the group became popular. In essence, Simmons thought the group best embodied his belief in the lucrative nature of promoting black rebellion to a mainstream audience.

Public Enemy embodied the spirit of a defiantly Afrocentric and Black Power persona in their lyrics. For instance, in “Rebel Without a Pause,” Ridenhour rapped “Hard - my calling card/Recorded and ordered - supporter of Chesimard” referencing JoAnne Chesimard, the former Black Panther and Black Liberation Army member who escaped a prison sentence for killing a police officer by fleeing to Cuba.<sup>68</sup> Ridenhour was particularly supportive of Louis Farrakhan in his lyrics. In “Don’t Believe the Hype,” Ridenhour stated “The follower of Farrakhan/don’t tell me

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 98.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 98.

<sup>67</sup> Simmons. *Life and Def.* 88.

<sup>68</sup> Public Enemy “Rebel Without a Pause” *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Def Jam Records. 1988.

you understand until you hear the man.”<sup>69</sup> “Bring the Noise” was similarly unequivocal in its praise, “Farrakhan's a prophet, and I think you ought to listen to/What he can say to you/ what you wanna do is follow for now.”<sup>70</sup> Although not directly affiliated with the Nation of Islam, the group seemed to espouse the same aspirations as Farrakhan. Unlike most other rap records, which tended to focus on partying and relationships, Public Enemy’s lyrics were strident in their political aims.

This defiant mentality was present in their music videos. Perhaps no other Public Enemy music video demonstrated this political nature as clearly as 1989’s “Fight the Power.” The video, directed by Spike Lee as a part of his larger publicity campaign for *Do the Right Thing*, left no room for subtlety in its message. From the opening newsreel of the March on Washington to the final shot of banner depicting the group with the caption “It takes a nation of millions to hold us back,” the video was designed to not only unify black youths who felt alienated by the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, but also firmly establish Public Enemy as the embodiment of modern black resistance. The song’s content also demonstrated this dynamic. In the song, Ridenhour lambasts the hypocrisy and toxic nature of white oppression. Arguably, the song’s most notorious lyrics, Ridenhour claimed: “Elvis/Was a hero to most/But he never meant shit to me/Straight up racist that sucker was simple and

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<sup>69</sup> Public Enemy “Don’t Believe the Hype”. *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Def Jam Records. 1988.

<sup>70</sup> Public Enemy “Bring the Noise” *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Def Jam Records. 1988.

plain” with Drayton chiming in: “Mother fuck him and John Wayne!”<sup>71</sup> Although Ridenhour claimed he only wanted to provoke a movement, not lead one, the song and corresponding video catapulted Public Enemy to the forefront of representing black rebellion. As stated by Def Jam staffer Bill Stephney, Public Enemy went “from a rap group playing the Latin Quarter with Biz and Shan and Run and Whodini to now being the saviors of the Black community.”<sup>72</sup> This rise in profile pleased Simmons, who correlated an increase in exposure to profitability. Whether or not Public Enemy could succeed in leading a new civil rights movement was irrelevant, either way, it would generate record sales.

But this increase in profile meant that Public Enemy’s previous methods of generating interest through controversy had to change. Previously, allowing Griffin to make scandalous comments was a standard part of Public Enemy’s modus operandi. Griffin, who typically did not rap acted as the group’s “minister of information” and regularly gave interviews. In these interviews, Anti-Semitic statements were not unusual for Griffin. For instance, one year prior, Griffin stated in an interview with *Melody Maker* magazine that “They say the white Jews built the pyramids. Shit. The Jews can’t even build houses that stand up nowadays. How the hell did they build the pyramids?” Griffin continued his vitriol with “If the Palestinians took up arms, went into Israel, and killed all the Jews, it’d be alright.”<sup>73</sup> Ridenhour supported Griffin, telling journalist John Leland in September of 1988, “I

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<sup>71</sup> Public Enemy. *Fight the Power*. Def Jam, 1989. MP3.

<sup>72</sup> Jeff Chang. *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: St. Martin Press, 2005) 280.

<sup>73</sup> “Belief Structures and Physical Realities” *Spin*. April 2000. 152.

back Griff. Whatever he says, he can prove”<sup>74</sup> When pressed about the anti-Semitic comments, Ridenhour admitted that the statements had been taken out of context and that the group was not specifically anti-Semitic, but that 98 percent of black people did not see a difference between Jews and white people. In essence, Ridenhour argued that Griffin’s comment, albeit poorly worded, was pro-black, not anti-Semitic.

Theoretically, the content of the May 1989 interview was little different than any of Griffin’s earlier interviews. But because of increased public awareness of the group, thanks to “Fight the Power,” they became too controversial. Griffin would later claim the writer, David Mills, had tricked him into saying the racist statements, “It was supposed to be a musical interview....It was music, music, music, and then he slips in a question about who controls the music industry. I was caught off guard....He made it sound like I was lashing out. I was under a lot of stress.”<sup>75</sup>

Regardless of Griffin’s claims, the interview was damning for Public Enemy.

In response, the Jewish Defense Organization began to protest against the group as a whole and began picketing screenings of *Do the Right Thing*. The JDO also attacked Jewish members of Def Jam’s staff for enabling the hatred of Public Enemy, particularly Rubin, although he was no longer with Def Jam. JDO spokesperson Leonard Fineberg claimed Rubin was “self-hating Jewish trash” and that “he could have put a crimp on [Public Enemy] in the first place.” Fineberg continued, “We’re

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 152.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 152.



going to punish him for his lack of morality through strong but legal and effective means.”<sup>76</sup>

Faced with pressure from Def Jam, Columbia, the JDO, and general public outcry, Ridenhour was forced to address Griffin’s comments and try to appease the situation. Ridenhour announced that Griffin was fired from the group. However, the move upset the group’s more strident African-American fans, who felt the dismissal of Griffin was evidence that Public Enemy was not as strong on Black Power as they claimed. This sentiment was felt in Armond Whie, who wrote in Brooklyn’s *City Sun*, “Now in apology, Chuck...isn’t good for anything except recording mindless, pointless, confections....This is the first tough fight Public Enemy has had to face and they’ve crumbled like chalk.”<sup>77</sup> Regardless, “Fight the Power” became an anthem during the summer of 1989. In addition, on August 1, Ridenhour announced Griffin would be returning to Public Enemy with the new title of Supreme Allied Chief of Community Relations.<sup>78</sup> The new position allowed Griffin to stay in the group to appease its hardcore Black Power fans, but under the assumption he would not be allowed to interview in order not to upset the group’s critics. Griffin’s return to the group helped their third album *Fear of a Black Planet* go platinum, continuing their prior success.

Despite being on a leash when it came to his public appearance, Griffin’s inclusion back in Public Enemy was upsetting to some Def Jam artists. This

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<sup>76</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 171.

<sup>77</sup> Marcus Reeves. *Somebody Scream!: Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftershock of Black Power.* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008) 82.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

resentment came to a head in early 1990 with a fight between Griffin and members of 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass, all of whom were Jewish. The commotion began when Griffin called one member a “fucking Jew bastard” and culminated with a destructive melee in Def Jam’s offices. Griffin’s behavior forced Russell Simmons, who had previously stayed hands off with artist affairs, to make a public statement. Simmons’ statement banned Griffin from Def Jam grounds and forced him to leave the label. Simmons wrote: “I don’t like Professor Griff and I hate what he stands for,” and continued “Griff’s wildest imaginary Jewish conspiracy could not have done more damage to Public Enemy than has Griff himself.”<sup>79</sup> However, Simmons defended the other members of the group: “Public Enemy has had a more positive influence on today’s young black Americans than has anyone else.”<sup>80</sup> With Simmons’ final decision, Griffin was expelled from Def Jam and Public Enemy.

Despite labeling Public Enemy his favorite group, Simmons ultimately was not lenient on group member Richard “Professor Griff” Griffin’s anti-Semitic comments in 1989. Simmons was initially hands-off with the situation, making no public comments after being pressured by the Jewish Defense Organization. Indeed, although Simmons forced Ridenhour to dismiss Griffin from the group, he allowed Ridenhour to give the public statement regarding Griffin’s dismissal in order to perpetuate the impression that the removal was Ridenhour’s own idea. Simmons was similarly quiet when Ridenhour reintroduced Griffin as Public Enemy’s Supreme Allied Chief of Community Relations in August of 1989. However, when

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<sup>79</sup> Steve Doughty. “Charges of Anti-Semitism Give Public Enemy a Rep That’s Tough to Rap Away” *People*. March 5, 1990. <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20116974,00.html>

<sup>80</sup> Gueraseva. *DefJam, Inc.* 180.

Griffin began harassing Jewish artists signed to Def Jam, Simmons could no longer remain silent and banned Griffin. However, Simmons was quick to defend the rest of Public Enemy, who were still a commercially viable and popular group, stating that the other members of the group had had “...a more positive influence on today’s young black Americans than has anyone else.”<sup>81</sup> Simmons hoped differentiating between Griffin and the rest of Public Enemy would demonstrate although he was in agreement of the message of the band, it would not be construed as condoning Griffin’s extremism. Simmons kept up this policy even after the controversy died down. Even in Simmons’ 2001 autobiography, Simmons labeled Public Enemy “...my favorite Def Jam group, right alongside Jay-Z and DMX” but does not mention any member of the group outside of Ridenhour.<sup>82</sup> Although Public Enemy was outspoken in their defiant attitude towards black rights, it stood in stark contrast to the rest of Def Jam’s offerings, who were constructed to appeal to the mainstream. Including Public Enemy on Def Jam’s roster gave the rest of the label’s groups an element of edge and credibility they might not otherwise have. Simmons allowed Public Enemy to serve as a lightning rod for outside controversy, but drew the line when the beliefs of Griffin affected those within the company. Even though black fans of Public Enemy may have seen the dismissal of Griffin as hypocritical, Simmons was in the business of making money through profiting off the appearance of black rebellion, not in the actual rebellion itself.

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<sup>81</sup> Gueraseva. *Def Jam, Inc.* 180.

<sup>82</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def.* 88.

Considering Simmons' treatment of Griffin, as well as his other cultural decisions in running Def Jam, the question still remained if Def Jam could be considered a truly black record label. By some reckoning, it could not. Strictly speaking, Def Jam was initially created by Rick Rubin, a white man, to make music that appealed primarily to his own sensibilities. After this initial manifestation was abandoned upon Rubin's partnership with Simmons and Def Jam transformed into label home to Hip-Hop artists and black rebellion, the incarnation best known to consumers, the label was still not totally "black." Def Jam could never live up to the image created of a label dedicated solely to the creation of rap music that was defiant, racially and politically charged, fully black, and aggressive with little regard for political correctness. Even from its onset, Simmons purposefully marketed Def Jam's artists and their persona to the white mainstream, hoping white audiences would flock to a seemingly more authentic presentation of rebellion than found in contemporary rock music. Simmons also promoted his acts as rockers in order to increase crossover appeal. In addition, once artists took their level of rebellion to an extreme that was detrimental to the company's bottom line, such as Griffin's anti-Semitic remarks in 1989, Simmons was quick to dismiss them. Furthermore, Simmons' attempts to turn Oran "Juice" Jones and other R&B pet projects demonstrate his lack of faith in rap alone to bring about long-term viability for his enterprises. Def Jam was never the home just of rap acts, although they would become the performers with the most notoriety and set the perception for the label as a whole.

Despite these problematic decisions, Simmons was meticulous in maintaining his public image. Ultimately, it was this persona that became his most enduring legacy. Simmons would come to have the perception of being wealthy, a savvy business person, and in direct control over his companies, which retroactively vindicated his previous work. In essence, although Simmons' actual running of Def Jam was problematic: primarily denoted by delegation and absenteeism verging upon apathy, since the label ultimately became profitable, and Simmons was portrayed as the guiding force behind Def Jam, Simmons must have been an integral part. There was no denying that Simmons was wealthy and seemingly omnipresent in his various ventures, so it would only follow that he was key to his own success. Likewise, the Hip-Hop culture, which was grown and marketed outside of New York by Simmons, became a truly global phenomenon, which only gave more veracity to Simmons' claims. In short, Simmons became an icon of black entrepreneurialism and success, despite spending most of his rise to affluence outside the office.

Simmons' rise to the zenith of personal wealth and notoriety corresponded with a change in the music business. In 1999, the same year that Universal purchased Def Jam in a blockbuster \$130 million dollar deal, an Internet peer-to-peer music sharing service called Napster was released to the general public. Although the service would shut down a year later admit court orders and copyright violations, the impact of Napster was evident. Not only did Napster popularize online distribution, it also lowered the price point of a compact disc from \$14 to free. Although listeners were still interested in listening to their favorite groups and discovering new genres, they were less likely to pay as much for the medium. The

financial impact upon the record business was dramatic. For instance, in 1999, revenue from all the major labels combined was around 14.6 billion dollars. Ten years later, that number had fallen to 6.3 billion.<sup>83</sup> This fall in revenue applied to all genres, including rap music.

Faced with decreased income from album sales, diversification into other media fields, akin to those done by Simmons, became the norm for many rappers and Hip-Hop executives. The perception of a level of business savvy, demonstrated through a plethora of other enterprises outside of making records, became the expectation as the new millennium continued. In essence, not only had Simmons changed youth culture around the world through his commodification of rebellion, he had also changed business culture through the manner by which he portrayed to helm his enterprises. Subsequent rap moguls, such as Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs and Percy “Master P” Miller, fashioned themselves after Simmons because he provided the most readily accessible and replicable template for lucrative success. Simmons’ influence was not solely felt within black music, as musicians and executives of numerous genres also sought to emulate Simmons’ techniques in order to cultivate success in their own respective fields.

In all, the legacy of Russell Simmons was as complicated as the man himself. He was both ardent capitalist and Eastern philosophy adherent. Equal parts demanding micro-manager who cultivated even the most minute details of his early

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<sup>83</sup> David Goldman. "Music's Lost Decade: Sales Cut in Half." *CNNMoney*. February 3, 2010. Accessed January 14, 2016. [http://money.cnn.com/2010/02/02/news/companies/napster\\_music\\_industry/](http://money.cnn.com/2010/02/02/news/companies/napster_music_industry/).

acts and apathetic absentee owner who spent his time high in a nightclub who delegated his responsibilities to others, he crafted an image of defiant and unapologetic blackness and deliberately marketed it to a mainstream white audience. Yet despite his contradictory nature, he embodied a persona that ultimately became his most lasting legacy. In essence, the way Russell Simmons claimed to have run his companies and achieve financial success became paramount in importance to the actions he actually took. It was this image that inspired subsequent aspiring moguls of not just rap music, but all genres, and demonstrated the final development of black music integrating itself into the mainstream consumer culture.

## CONCLUSION

In the early 2000s, a brand of potato chips with unique packaging could be found on convenience store shelves in African-American communities. Rap Snacks, with its brightly colored bags emblazoned with the faces of rappers such as Mack 10, Magic, Pretty Willie, among a host of others, beckoned consumers to buy their wares. In addition, each bag of Rap Snacks also contained a short positive message designed to help "deal with the social aspects of the inner city."<sup>1</sup> Most of these messages were the sort of general adages typically given as advice to youths regardless of race. For instance, Lil' Romeo's Bar-B-Quing with my Honey" chips advised snacking individuals to "Stay in School," while Warren G's "Cheezie Nacho" flavor extolled youngsters to "Respect Your Elders." A few of the messages were specific to the African-American aesthetic: Murphy Lee's "Extra Hot Red Hot Riplets" chips counseled youths to "Pimp Education," The Big Tymer's "Sour Cream & Dill" stated "We have come a long way," whereas the Youngbloodz's "Southern Crunk Barbeque" simply opined "Get Crunk."

Yet of all of the various flavors and messages found on Rap Snacks, one stood apart from the rest of the generic platitudes. Master P's "Platinum Bar-B-Que" flavor directed buyers to "Start your own business." Although most of the other advice was broad and generalized, this message is direct in its intent of encouraging more black entrepreneurialism and enterprise. Even over a century after the first meeting of the National Negro Business League, the idea that African-American

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<sup>1</sup> Reid Kanaley. "Chipping in for Urban Youth Hip-hop Icons on Rap Snacks Bags Spread the Owner's Positive Messages." Philly-archives. 2002.  
[http://articles.philly.com/2002-10-14/business/25351039\\_1\\_chips-bags-corner-stores](http://articles.philly.com/2002-10-14/business/25351039_1_chips-bags-corner-stores).



social uplift could correspond to individual economic success was not only still in existence but also, as evidenced by Rap Snack packaging, actively perpetuated.

Master P was an ideal spokesperson for such a belief. Born Percy Robert Miller in the Calliope projects of New Orleans, Miller was able to take a \$10,000 malpractice settlement from the death of his grandfather in 1990 and by 1998 turn it into a lucrative business empire with Miller's personal net worth in excess of \$400 million.<sup>2</sup> Aside from No Limit Records, Miller also owned No Limit Pictures, No Limit Sports Management, No Limit Gear, a phone-sex company, and a host of other enterprises, many with the "No Limit" moniker. Miller was especially successful because he owned multiple levels of distribution for his products. Miller not only owned the label, he likewise printed his own media, had an in-house artistic department, manufactured and shipped his own CDs, and even owned several of the record stores in which No Limit's music was sold. Additionally, although No Limit had a distribution deal with Priority Records starting in 1996 (as well as Universal Records after 2003), Miller maintained ownership of the masters, as well as received 85% of the profits from record sales. Even though No Limit albums never charted as much as Motown or Def Jam acts, Miller was able to make more money on music sales than either Gordy or Simmons because he received a higher percentage of the profits from the record sales and he owned multiple levels of the music's production, distribution, and sale.

Although the recording music industry changed tremendously throughout the twentieth century, it retained much of its attractiveness that made it initially

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin Chappell. "The CEO\$" *Jet* January 2001. 116.

appealing to proponents of black entrepreneurialism. As a result of technological progress, such as the development from the vinyl record to the cassette tape, compact disc, and MP3 as the preferred medium for consumption, the recording industry maintained an element of novelty despite an over century-long existence. Likewise, the creation of new genres also perpetuated this perception of freshness. Furthermore, despite a steep drop-off at the dawn of the new millennium, the music industry remained financially lucrative throughout most of the twentieth century. Although genres and performers inevitably waxed and waned in popularity, as trends are wont to do, consumer demand for music continued at a stable level. This sustained consumer demand also continued the music business' capacity to create prevalent public images of musicians. Although the relative benefit or detriment of this imagery was debatable, none could deny its omnipresence in the American cultural landscape.

In all, the recording industry and its wares were installed as a fixture in American pop culture. Performers of all sorts of background became famous and entered into America's collective cultural memory. Additionally, the perpetual consumer demand for music resulted in some musicians becoming quite wealthy, and their recording companies similarly reaping the financial benefits. Miller was not alone in finding immense wealth in sale of recorded music, with numerous companies similarly achieving such success.

From a consumer culture standpoint, music performed by black artists had become thoroughly mainstream. Although major racial issues still existed for African-Americans as a whole, by any reckoning black performers could not only

become popular, but also become very financially successful within the mass market. Rap music especially merged the beliefs of entrepreneurialism and economic uplift with its lyrics and imagery. In particular, the idea of the rapper as a mogul who owned several companies with diverse revenue streams became commonplace. Rappers were expected to not only rap, but also own a record label, clothing line, and a host of other businesses at the very least. In essence, the expectation became for a rapper to not only be a performer of music but also a successful business owner.

This expectation of merging cultural endeavors with economic enterprise came in large part because of the legacy of Russell Simmons. The manner by which Simmons was perceived to have run Def Jam ultimately became his most lasting legacy. Although Simmons was not himself a performer, his penchant for self-promotion gave him a legacy equivalent to, if not surpassing, the artists signed to Def Jam. These inheritors of Simmons' legacy were keenly aware of his influence on their careers. Sean "Puffy" Combs iterated this sentiment in 1998: "If it weren't for Russell Simmons, I wouldn't be in the game....he taught us that you can go out there, get your money and be yourself, and you don't have to throw on your tap dancing shoes."<sup>3</sup> Combs' assessment of Simmons' influence also illuminated how enduring the belief of racial uplift through economic enterprise had been throughout the twentieth century. For Combs and other later moguls, Simmons demonstrated that black performers did not have to yield to stereotypes or expectations in order to become successful. Moreover, the omnipresence of hip-hop culture among all races

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin Chappell. "The CEO\$" *Jet* January 2001. 120.

within America demonstrated that not only did black performers refuse to comply with predetermined labels, but also they could indeed change the mainstream consumer culture to their own desires. Yet above all, such subversion of racial expectations could be profitable. Miller, Combs, and the other rap moguls believed that their selling of music and other products was ultimately beneficial to the black community because it was so lucrative. Although seemingly following the immigrant model of starting small menial businesses and through persistent labor gaining enough money and respect to be accepted fully into the mainstream society, the development of black record labels subverts such an ideal because of the almost immediate emphasis on national distribution. Essentially, these record label owners believed that the bigger their company, the greater the positive impact they could have upon the African-American community.

But despite the claims of these moguls, the correlation between individual black entrepreneurial success and betterment for the race never materialized. This ideal, championed first by Harry Pace and later by Berry Gordy and Russell Simmons, was long-lasting, yet was never obtained due in large part to the very nature of consumer culture. In selling records that claimed to embody authentic black culture, the culture itself became commodified and available for sale. Additionally, as demonstrated by the manner in which Pace, Gordy, and Simmons marketed their labels, their artists were typically not as free to express radical racial or political sentiments as black artists on white-owned labels, for fear such radicalism would harm record sales. Subsequently, the resulting labels did little to

elevate communal economic success, and tended to stay conservative in their artists' public personas.

Yet despite these shortcomings, one cannot call these labels failures. Black Swan, Motown, and Def Jam succeeded in giving black musicians (and black culture as a whole) mainstream exposure, publicity, and provided a livelihood for artists and employees alike. More than anything else, these labels demonstrated that the mainstream market was willing to buy media from black artists. As the twentieth century continued, African-American performers became more engrained in American pop culture, culminating at the point where there was no distinction between music made for a black audience and music made for a universal audience. As Miller once stated, "All I'm doing is making hit records. I don't care who buys it."<sup>4</sup>

The emergence of music performed by black artists as a viable mainstream genre is due in large part to the success of these three entrepreneurs. The three owners were able to not only sell records, but also found varying degrees of success in the manufacture of a depiction of black lifestyle alongside their wares. For Pace, this vision was decidedly upper class: highlighting the ability of African-American to appreciate and financially support high-cultured musical genres. Pace desired to prove black audiences could be just as sophisticated as white audiences. Although Pace was not as economically or culturally as successful as Gordy and Simmons, he provided a template for selling lifestyle as well as records. Gordy's aspirations for Motown were middle class. By emphasizing the respectability and non-threatening nature of Motown's artists, Gordy was able to sell mainstream America on the idea

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 122.

that black performers were akin in their aspirations to those of conventional audiences. Even through the turbulent Civil Rights Movement, Gordy was able to preserve a vision of decorum for Motown. Simmons desired Def Jam and his artists to represent under class rebellion. His image of rappers was steeped in putting on a depiction of rebellion he believed audiences would find most authentic because a black person performed it. Simmons also represented the most complete method of monetizing this lifestyle outside of music. Although Gordy found middling success in expanding Motown's brand to include movies and other media, Simmons was able to parlay his successful marketing of Def Jam's depiction of black rebellion into numerous other products, including clothing lines, pre-paid credit cards, and other enterprises. By expanding his business into other fields, Simmons was able to find the most financial success, and set the expectation for subsequent black entrepreneurs.

Under the guidance of Pace, Gordy, and Simmons, African-American performers were able to find financial success, yet profitability came at a cost. As demonstrated by the decision of these record labels owners, the economic concerns of keeping a record label profitable overran considerations of music's cultural value. Black Swan Records may have been formed to prove the African-American audience was capable of appreciating classical music and other high culture, yet despite these lofty goals, the record company folded in 1923. No amount of high objectives for Black Swan could cover for its existence being based upon the profitability of selling records. Subsequent black-owned labels, as demonstrated by Gordy's Motown, learned from the failure of Black Swan and did not limit their consumer base by

race. The expansion from a niche to a mainstream market made it easier to find financial sustainability, but forced the resulting records to maintain a universal appeal. Although Simmons eschewed the veneer of black respectability in favor of black rebellion, the transition was based upon the changing demands of mainstream consumers, not an ingrained desire to be more truthful to the African-American experience. These companies were selling a depiction of black America, yet in packaging this vision, it ultimately became inauthentic. Although the resulting music may have been popular, it lost much of its ability to genuinely affect social change for African-Americans. Due to these owners' actions, black music simply became another product to purchase within the larger mainstream consumer culture instead of a distinct entity to be appreciated on its own merit, or able to generate answers for racial problems facing African-Americans throughout the twentieth century. Race became a selling point, yet aside from that racial label, the music available for public consumption was fundamentally no different than any other. Much like the later Rap Snacks, which were essentially identical to any other brand of potato chips aside from packaging, there was no difference between records by a black performer from a black-owned company as opposed to a record of a black performer from a white-owned company. In order to buy in to the American marketplace, African-American record label owners had to sell out their higher aspirations for the black community. Although selling out was ultimately lucrative, as evidenced by the financial success they achieved, they were unable to parley this success into a similar collective uplift for the African-American community, as was the promise of black entrepreneurialism.

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