

Requiem for a Mac by Eryc K Arnold

Written by By Eric K. Arnold ID361
Wednesday, 10 November 2004 07:29 -

I first met Mac Dre the day after he got out of prison in 1996, by which time he'd become a Bay Area folk hero, a modern-day Stagger Lee. As part of a 4080 Magazine cover story, we hung out with his mother, Wanda Salvatto (aka Mac Wanda), at her crib in Vallejo, where we drank Crown Royal, smoked a few too many blunts, laughed a lot, and snacked on fried chicken and mac "n" cheese.

Fresh from a nearly five-year bid for robbery, Dre was in good shape physically and mentally. Tall and lanky, he smiled easily and appeared eager to reestablish himself doing what he did best: rapping. He didn't particularly seem like a dangerous criminal -- a convicted bank robber and possibly worse -- although he was clutching the pink slip to a brand-new, limited-edition Chevy SS Camaro he'd purchased the very day he hit the streets. Dre may have been a baller, but he struck me as a basically normal (if charismatic) fellow from the "hood who had fallen in with the streets, but wasn't really a bad guy at heart. I got the sense that he regretted being away for so long, and was trying to make up for lost time.

That time is now permanently lost. It's painful to hear about the Tragic Death by Violent Means of yet another rapper, especially when he's a Bay Area pioneer who paved the way for untold generations to follow.

Andre Hicks, aka Mac Dre, a true underground legend, was murdered last weekend in Kansas City by an unknown assailant. The story, still sketchy in its details, sounds all too familiar: In the early morning hours of November 1, a few days after a performance at a club in KC, Dre was riding shotgun in a white van driven by Dubee, his longtime cuddie (that's Crestside, Vallejo, parlance for "close homie"). Picture them rollin', cruising down Highway 71 like the West Coast Ridaz they were born to be, listening to the radio, passing blunts back and forth, and talking shit about the wack-ass crowd at the show they'd just left, and the wack-ass promoter who reportedly neglected to pay Dre for it.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, another car pulls up beside them. Angry words are perhaps exchanged, followed by a rapid burst of gunshots from an AK-47, apparently aimed at the driver. The van swerves off the road and crashes. A few minutes pass. Dubee slowly staggers out of the wreckage. He's dazed, but not seriously wounded. Mac Dre is not so lucky, hit by one solitary slug, quite possibly a stray bullet intended for Dubee. But unlike his cuddie, he won't be getting up.

It plays like a clichéd scene from a gangster movie, the kind cable channel TNT -- whose slogan

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proclaims "We know drama" -- is always showing. Mac Dre also knew drama -- quite personally. He grew up extra-mannish in the thuggish, ruggish Crestside district of Vallejo; his formative years coincided with the mid-'80s introduction of the crack cocaine economy to the "hood. A second-generation V-town Mac, he started rapping as a teenager, back in the early days of hip-hop. Dre soon became a protégé of Michael Robinson, the original "Mac," who put out a seminal Khayree Shaheed-produced Bay Area rap classic, *The Game Is Thick*, in 1988, before being murdered in a case of mistaken identity just as the local underground rap movement was taking off.

Dre quickly followed in Robinson's footsteps, releasing a slew of hugely influential full-length albums (again produced by Shaheed) on the Strictly Business label between 1989 and 1992. The rapper notched several popular tunes around this time, including "California Livin'," a party track celebrating the Golden State lifestyle whose influence can be heard on both Digital Underground's "I Get Around" and Tupac's "California Love." But his biggest hit was "Too Hard for the Fuckin' Radio," an infectious track built around a funky Chaka Khan sample that showcased Dre's old-school rap style: Eighteen, makin' hits 'til I'm eighty tho'/And too hard for the fuckin' radio.

Sadly, it was not meant to be.

After his third album, *What's Really Goin' On?*, Dre was implicated in a series of bank robberies committed by the infamous Romper Room gang. During Dre's trial, his lyrics were entered as evidence of his connection to the robbery spree, and used to give him a four-and-a-half-year prison term. Seems Dre had incurred the ire of the cops with the song "Punk Police," on which he taunted detectives for their inability to catch the gang, who had become almost-mythic outlaws.

Bay Area rap flourished in Dre's absence, evolving from the East Coast-influenced sound of the Strictly Business era to the slower tempos and keyboard-heavy funky slumper beats of what became known as mobb music. The momentum generated by Dre and Strictly Business was furthered by legions of turf-based artists, including E-40 and the Click (Dre's one-time crosstown rivals from Vallejo's Hillside "hood), as well as Shaheed's Crestside-based label Young Black Brotha (named in honor of Dre), whose roster at one time included Dubee, Ray Luv, Young Lay, and teenage phenom Mac Mall.

Even while incarcerated, Dre kept his Mac hand in the rap game. Over the phone from jail, he recorded the album *Back N da "Hood*, and contributed a memorable verse to the YBB all-star posse cut "Pimp Shit" (Straight from the Crest, fool, I thought you knew), one of the illest tracks on Mac Mall's breakthrough 1993 album *Illegal Business?*, which sold hundreds of thousands of copies independently and led to YBB inking a major distribution deal with Atlantic.

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Unfortunately, Dre mostly missed out on this golden age of North Bay rap, which peaked with the single by Young Lay, "All About My Fetti," a Shaheed-produced banger included on the gold-selling New Jersey Drive soundtrack. By the time Dre was finally released from prison in late 1996, not only had Mac Mall surpassed Dre in terms of both sales and name recognition as the Vallejo Mac of record, but Young Black Brotha's partnership with Atlantic had gone south. Ultimately, Dre split from the YBB camp and formed his own Romp Records, which put out 1997's Rompilation, one of the better Bay Area compilations of that period.

Despite his troubles, Dre's inventiveness, creativity, and sense of humor remained intact, as evidenced by his affinity for concept-driven material on which he created colorful alter egos.

After several releases in 2002 and 2003 under the name Thizzelle Washington, he appeared as "Ronald Dregan" on the cover of the album Dreganomics (get it?) wearing a preppy shirt, tie, and slacks, topped off by a Fred MacMurray-esque hat. That picture says a lot about Mac Dre: Despite his criminal past and "hood rep, he never took himself so seriously that he couldn't play around a bit with his image and have fun with it. He not only got the joke, he wanted you to get it too.

That day of the 4080 interview, as we rode around in his new car, we bumped into Mac Mall in traffic, and he ended up accompanying us back to Dre's mother's house. It seemed a random coincidence at the time; looking back now, it feels more like fate. The younger rapper was then at the height of his fame, but appeared genuinely awed by Dre's presence.

I didn't really stay in touch with Dre much after that, although I continued to hear about his career, which remained highly prolific, right up to his last breath: He released more than twenty albums, including recent titles such as Stupid Doo Doo Dumb and Rapper Gone Bad. He moved from Vallejo to Sacramento, partially for a change of scenery, and partially because his notoriety meant he was constantly sweated by the V-town po-pos.

After starting yet another label, Thizz Entertainment, Dre's career seemed to be picking up steam, fifteen years after it began. His latest album, The Game Is Thick Part Two, debuted in the Bay Area Top 20 mere days before his death, and was the highest-ranking album by a local artist to make the charts the week of October 29.

You'll probably never hear Mac Dre's name on VH-1 specials commemorating hip-hop's history. However, his legacy remains a momentous one in the annals of West Coast rap. In addition to setting an early standard for thugged-out mobb music, he'll also be remembered as an underground trendsetter, a poster boy for indie-label DIY success. Dre was also one of the first rappers to use pimp imagery and turf symbolism, long before it became practically de rigueur to do so. But perhaps the biggest compliment is his influence on Tupac Shakur, who reportedly looked up to Dre while still an up-and-coming rapper -- not the other way around. As proof, look no further than the title track of Dre's album Young Black Brotha, which may have inspired "Young Black Male" from "Pac's debut.

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Before we move on to the next headline sensationalizing violent black-on-black crime, let's remember all the good times Mac Dre's music has provided over the years. Nothing seems more apt, perhaps, than "California Livin'": California living it up, girls be giving it up/So kick back, max, relax and put some Hen in your cup. Just don't forget to pour a little out.

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