

An Open Letter from Hip Hop Artist Ras Kass

Written by Ras Kass / forward by Davey D ID3224
Thursday, 11 January 2007 01:42 -

Ras Kass Open Letter: Does Slavery Exist on Major Record Labels?

Anyone who wants to get in the music industry needs to read this open letter just so you can understand how sinister some of these major record labels can get. What hip hop artist Ras Kass describes is a straight up share cropping system. The lawsuit tactic they employed is outright scary. If you think we've made it in 2007 think again-Prince once upon a time had to resort to putting the word slave on his cheek because of a similar situation. Ras Kass may not have that word emblazoned on his body but from what he broke down, he's just that a slave to the corporate power structure. Read this and learn people - Davey D (Hip Hop Activist / Hip Hop Historian)

Open letter from Ras Kass to Capitol Records:

As a corporation, EMI/Capitol Records has a financial obligation to it's shareholders to make sure that it's stock goes up each quarter, but at some point isn't there some ethical obligation to it's employees (artists) to be humane and show some degree of moral turpitude? Furthermore, can't these two ideals coexist, especially in my case?

It seems to me and many others that since the year 2000 Capitol is either unable or unwilling to offer me an opportunity to (1) release and market my music and (2) thereby allow me to generate income for myself and the company. So the logical and fiscal thing to do would be to allow a third party capable of successfully translating my talent into profit, do just that. Instead I've been foiled in every attempt to either work within the confines of Capitol; when I've tried to find any amicable way of bringing in any interested third party I've been thwarted by egomaniacal executives who refuse to be the least bit reasonable in my efforts to work out a solution for all parties involved.

For six years EMI/Capitol has enforced a contract that they have breached time after time, paying attorneys thousand of dollars to bind me to a record deal that they themselves refuse to honor. I ask you, how is not allowing me to generate ANY income financially viable for their shareholders? How is not allowing me to work within or outside the company for six years morally justifiable? Now, after an entire decade, one third of my life, watching this label's entire artists" roster change at least five times over, I simply would like to ask why? Why are you doing this to me?

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I've been criticized for, and accused of many things, but my professional work ethic has never been called into question. Since the day I signed to Priority Records, I've worked diligently to the best of my ability, often with limited resources to uphold my end of our recording agreement and successfully delivered two albums in 1996 and 1998, even going so far, as to move back to Los Angeles in 2000 to jumpstart my third album respectively titled 'Van Gogh". Unfortunately for me these facts have been overlooked when in 2001 I was set to release 'Van Gogh" amid the chaotic Capitol/Priority merger, and Wendy Goldstein was given the VP position.

In a meeting with Wendy, my attorney, and myself during Nov. 2000 one week before my album was set to be released without proper marketing (due to internal fears resulting from the impending downsizing). With all parties afore mentioned knowing that through no fault of my own the album was doomed to underachieve, Wendy persuaded me to "record a few more songs" and give Capitol enough time to properly promote this project that would later be known as 'Goldyn Chyld". Apologies were made as well as a verbal agreement, with my attorney present, as to who would bear the brunt of the financial responsibility due to the drawn out recording process and mismanagement (1999-2002) of the Van Gogh project - Capital would rightfully incur those costs. So in good faith I began recording "a few new songs". While recording, new ads were placed in XXL and The Source magazines that read like obituaries:

REST IN PEACE 1999-2002

Van gogh of priority records, age 3,

died Tuesday, January 1st 2002, of complications

from bootlegging, corporate drama & corporate bullshit

An admission of responsibility if there ever was one. The" Goldyn Chyld" master was accepted but not surprisingly Capitol and Wendy reneged on their verbal agreement. I would be held wholly accountable for the mismanagement of my project (Van Gogh).

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Later that year 2002 I would learn that Andy Slater president of capital decided he was not releasing Goldyn Chyld because Dr. Dre refused to allow capital to release the song he produced for me entitled "Whoop" as the first single. The problem was there had already been a first single released. Goldyn Chyld's title song produced by DJ Premier had already been shipped as promotional vinyl and CD's to college/mixshow radio and it had always been agreed upon as the lead street single.

The next single called "See What I See" was for urban radio and the first video, and the plan had always been for "Whoop" to be the crossover record to propel my album post-release. None the less, Capitol tried to coerce Dr. Dre, failed, and penalized me. I would be left in limbo, go to jail for a year, expected to owe Capitol for the two mismanaged albums and hope that a year from then I would be given a chance to record a third album even after I had already had the rug pulled out from under my feet twice.

Timeline-wise this puts us at late 2002, when I saw no other option but to sue for breach of contract in hopes that it would bring attention from parent company EMI to how mismanaged my situation was, expecting they would resolve it fairly. Didn't happen, after I sued Capitol in California I was not only served with a counter-suit from Capitol in Hollywood but also sued in NYC by EMI. Lawsuits cost generous sums of money and since it wasn't financially feasible for me, I was unable to answer the New York case. In retrospect if I could've come up with another \$20,000 logic prevails that EMI would have sued me in another state too, specifically to force me to spread myself thin, knowing I didn't have that kind of capital to keep expending especially since I technically hadn't worked in six years.

Basically EMI won a default judgement meaning a no-show on a case that is the complete opposite allegation of the Capital lawsuit. Capital claimed I never turned in an album, while EMI registered 30+ songs in one day to ASCAP and alleged that from 2000-2003 I committed copyright infringement. They were even petty enough to sue regional mixtape DJ's who put Ras Kass freestyles on their tapes. Mind you, these were songs they neither wanted to use nor were the majority ever paid for including studio time. Also, it is normal music industry practice to release unused, or "exclusive" songs to the internet and mixtape dj's to promote the album and create a 'buzz". Still, after four years that precedent allowed the California legal system to grant a motion of dismissal, which brings me to this.

As an employee of any company you get paid every two weeks, whereas an artist you only get paid when you put out an album. So why wouldn't I want to release a project? The only person I would be hurting is myself, right? Further proving my point, between Sept. 05 and Sept. 06, a twelve-month period, I recorded three full length mixed CD's worth of material. Compare two

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albums in ten years with capital to 3 potential albums in one-year independently. I repeat - I just want to work.

In closing I would like to say that what has been done to me is a travesty. There are many people worldwide, including former and present Priority/Capitol employees who consider me one of the most prolific urban poets of our time and who believe that my ordeal is a disservice to Hip Hop as a collective. As of today, because of the courts ruling, which is legal but not moral or just, I have no choice but to again honor the contract Priority/Capitol has rarely honored since 2000.

Ironically, any attempts by me or my council to move forward have been drawn out, irrational, or just plain not responded to as we attempt to either release an album on capital or attempt to negotiate an amicable release (from the label). I wonder at times why EMI/Capitol continues to effectively enforce a judgement that it neither wants nor plans to honor, and how the costs incurred in undermining my career have been justified to upper management and shareholders. After 10 years hasn't my life been held up enough? What if I was your son or daughter with a dream, how would you feel then? I hope there's some shred of decency in some part of the executive level of EMI or Capitol so that we can at least have a rational dialogue moving towards resolution.

Sincerely, Ras Kass