



THE

BIG

PAYBACK

**THE HISTORY OF THE
BUSINESS OF HIP-HOP**

Side A

High

If you heard a rap record on the radio in 1984, Russell Simmons had something to do with it. Run-DMC, Kurtis Blow, Fat Boys, Whodini—Simmons got paid off of them all as either a producer, manager, or promoter.

Then Simmons caught a record that wasn't his. The song had no music. No Sugar Hill house band, no cheesy melody, no keyboards, no bass line. The record took Simmons's stripped-down, beat-box sound and amplified it. The drums were bigger, the scratches louder, the rhymes harder. The rap was nothing like he had ever heard, the MC talking in polysyllables, calling out to the "analyzing, summarizing, musical myth-seeking people of the universe, this is yours!"

It was as if the MC were speaking directly to him. Here was the rap music Simmons envisioned when he made "Sucker MCs." It was street; it was uncompromising. And it wasn't his record.

Whose record is it? thought Russell Simmons.

Simmons eventually tracked it down—"It's Yours," by T La Rock & Jazzy Jay. He knew Jazzy Jay very well: Afrika Bambaataa's DJ, Red Alert's cousin. Jay spun regularly at the hottest club in town, the Roxy.

But Simmons didn't know anything about the label that released Jay's record, Def Jam, nor the person listed as the song's producer, Rick Rubin.

Whoever this nigger is, Simmons thought, he just made the Blackest record ever.

A White, Jewish college junior hailing from suburban Long Island, Frederick Jay Rubin operated "Def Jam Recordings" out of his dorm room at New York University. As for the song that electrified Russell Simmons and the streets of New York during the summer of 1984, Rubin recorded it with a drum machine and \$300 from his parents, who had been funding his dreams for years.

"Ricky," his mother exclaimed, "can do anything!"

Linda Rubin—a big, bleached-blond, boisterous woman—often regaled family, friends, and visitors with tales like this: One year when Ricky was in grade school, she and her husband, Mickey, took him to one of the Jewish resorts in the Catskills. These hotels, like Grossinger's and the Concord, packed their daily schedules with activities, classes, and games for children. When the Rubins arrived, there was already a science competition in full swing.

"All those other kids had been working for days on their projects when Ricky entered it," Linda later bragged. "And would you *believe* it, he *FUCK-ING WON?!!*"

When Ricky wanted to learn magic tricks, Linda and Mickey drove him into the city to mix with real magicians at their friend's Irv Tannen's legendary magic shop. He conversed well with adults as he plied them for tips and tricks. Soon he was performing professional-level magic shows for kids and grown folks alike, pocketing hundreds of dollars for his efforts.

Mickey Rubin—a tall, heavysset man with a deep voice and a sensible manner—owned a discount furniture store, and he and Linda supported their son's projects with plenty of cash and praise in equal measure. When Ricky wanted to take up photography and design, they bought him a camera and enrolled him in a summer course at Harvard. When Ricky wanted to learn guitar, they bought him a used Gibson SG. When Ricky took to punk rock, and wanted to see bands like the Cramps and the Contortions play at Manhattan clubs like Max's Kansas City or CBGB, they drove him—letting Ricky go inside alone, waiting patiently in their Cadillac for him to emerge. When Ricky formed a band called the Pricks, Linda designed the logo. When Ricky started bringing girls home, they gave him an entire room in the basement for his privacy. And when Ricky turned sixteen and desired even more independence, Mickey and Linda got him a brand-new Fiat—which he drove to Long Beach High every day even though the school was right across the street from their house.

Long Beach High served three distinct groups of students, from three

different parts of the same, narrow island between the Atlantic Ocean and the Middle Bay. The upper-middle-class Italian and Jewish kids like Rick lived on the east end, in Lido Beach. The less wealthy Italian and Irish kids lived on the west end, in Atlantic Beach. And the Black kids lived in between them, in run-down Long Beach. During Rick's years there, Long Beach High closed a few times because of pitched battles between groups of Black and White kids. Rick called them "race riots."

But Rick—a big, stocky kid with long hair—stayed above the fray. He quietly disdained many of his White classmates for their pedestrian tastes. While he was in the city listening to the latest cutting-edge music, his peers on Long Island remained stuck on the old stalwarts of rock radio: Led Zepelin, Yes, and Pink Floyd. The only people at school who listened to new music, in fact, were the Black kids. And all the Black kids were listening to rap.

Where many White kids hated rap, Rick was curious. Every week, it seemed the Black kids at Long Beach High were all about some new group. One week, it was the Crash Crew. The next, it was the Funky Four. Whoever had the new record out, that was the new favorite. In this way, Rick grasped that rap and punk were a lot alike. Punk and rap groups made songs for the moment and tossed them away a minute later, because there was always something newer, better, and fresher. Both were created by near amateurs, for the sheer fun of it. Both were rejections of the puffed-up, dressed-up pretention of 1970s music—whether art rock or disco. In both punk and rap, if it sounded raw, it was authentic. The "worse" it was, the better.

Rick tore into hip-hop the same way he did his other childhood fixations, trading magic for Mr. Magic. Rick recorded the DJ's WHBI show every Saturday night and listened to it all week with the rest of the Black kids in school. He bought every 12-inch single he could lay his hands on. He purchased a mixer from a local DJ and practiced turntable techniques. By the time he graduated in the spring of 1981, rap had become Rubin's second all-consuming musical passion. The school's yearbook printed a parting proverb from Ricky: "I wanna play loud. I wanna be heard. I want all to know. I'm not one of the herd."

In the fall Mickey Rubin moved his son into NYU's Weinstein Hall dormitory at 5 University Place in Greenwich Village. When Ricky moved out of the house, Linda Rubin left everything in both of Ricky's rooms exactly the way it was. Yellowing stacks of old rock magazines and newspapers. Curling posters of Devo and the Dead Kennedys. Dusty records and car repair manuals on the shelves. On a cabinet in the living room was Ricky's

school portrait. Linda always liked looking at his smiling baby face in that photo. She might never see that face again.

Ricky was growing a beard.

For Rick, Weinstein Hall was the perfect new home, just blocks away from a number of fantastic downtown punk rock clubs. But two months after Rubin moved into the city, a small reggae club nearby began hosting a weekly hip-hop party. The “Wheels of Steel” nights at Negril were Rick’s first opportunity to see his favorite rap groups live.

Rubin was shocked by how much better hip-hop was in person than on record. The cutting by DJs like Jazzy Jay and performances by MC crews like the Treacherous Three exploded from the stage like any Ramones or Dead Kennedys show. Their gigs sounded nothing like their records, which by comparison seemed like canned disco music with a bit of rap thrown on top. Live hip-hop, to Rick’s surprise, rocked. Negril immediately became an every-Thursday-night thing for Rick Rubin.

The “Wheels of Steel” night at Negril was a convergence of uptown artists and downtown audiences, hip-hop and punk, Black and White; one of the unpredictable consequences of the chance meeting four years earlier between Fab Five Freddy Brathwaite and Michael Holman.

At the time, Fab Five Freddy was a graffiti writer looking to break into the art world, and Holman a junior credit analyst on Wall Street by day, an art promoter by night. Holman, a lanky, light-skinned army brat from San Francisco who once danced onstage with the new wave group the Tubes, introduced Freddy to Jean-Michel Basquiat. Freddy, in turn, acquainted Holman with hip-hop.

Holman adopted Fab Five Freddy’s quest to unite the uptown and downtown scenes. Just as Fred led Blondie to the Bronx, Holman brought Malcolm McLaren, the British impresario behind the Sex Pistols, to witness Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation DJs in their milieu, the Bronx River Projects. McLaren was both terrified and transfixed by the field trip, and asked Holman to bring the Zulus to safer environs—opening up for his new punk-pop act, Bow Wow Wow, at the Ritz downtown. Holman assembled an unprecedented roster of DJs, MCs, breakers, and graffiti artists, and in September of 1981, all four elements of hip-hop played out before a stunned, enthusiastic White audience.

In the crowd was Ruza Blue, a British expatriate who ran McClaren’s SoHo boutique. Blue asked Holman if he could book that kind of show every Thursday night at her friend’s venue, a club called Negril. Holman drew in the Zulus to DJ, and Fab Five Freddy to MC—in the classic sense of the term, since Freddy didn’t consider himself much of a rapper. The parties attracted an adventurous mix of b-boys and punks, clubgoers and college students—including Rick Rubin, the stocky kid with tousled brown hair and a scruffy beard.

By early 1982, the club was filled to capacity, and the fire department shut the Thursday parties down. Ruza Blue looked for a bigger place. Holman decided not to go with her. Instead, he embarked on a grander mission: to create a TV show that would be the hip-hop version of *American Bandstand*.

Fab Five Freddy hipped Blue to a possible new venue: a cavernous, empty former roller-disco in Manhattan’s Chelsea district called the Roxy.

“I can’t see you packing that joint, though.” Fab Five Freddy told her. Blue’s solution to the problem of the extra space was simple: Make the room look smaller by bringing in some huge canvas curtains to section off the rest of the rink from the party.

Rick Rubin was among the hundred and fifty or so regulars who came to Blue’s first party at the Roxy. He knew Blue and Fred, and became chummy with Bambaataa’s DJ, Jazzy Jay. The NYU student watched and learned as Jay spun records with other Zulus like Afrika Islam upon a platform in the middle of the dance floor. It was the middle of 1982, when their “Planet Rock” ruled the clubs and airwaves.

Week by week, as the hip-hop night began to catch on, and hundreds became thousands, Rick Rubin saw Blue move the curtains back, farther and farther, until they were no longer needed. Graffiti artists created murals onstage. MC crews descended from the Bronx in a cascade of numbers: the Treacherous Three, the Fearless Four, the Furious Five. The Rock Steady Crew danced before incredulous, infatuated downtown scenesters, including Fred’s friends like Basquiat and Keith Haring, Glenn O’Brien and Andy Warhol, the Talking Heads and the B-52s, the Clash and David Bowie.

Artist managers used the club as a launching pad for new, unknown music artists, like Madonna and New Edition. Established pop record producers took the sounds of the Roxy hip-hop scene onto the radio and MTV.

Malcolm McLaren told Blue he wanted to make a rap record. Blue suggested Fab Five Freddy as the MC, but Fred demurred; he had heard bad

things about McLaren being an exploiter of artists and a “culture vulture.” Fred passed McLaren off to the Supreme Team, two MC/DJs who had bought the time slot on WHBI just after Mr. Magic. Malcolm McLaren’s “Buffalo Gals” became an international hit.

Fab Five Freddy made his own record when Jean Karakos, the owner of a French record label called Celluloid, saw a photo spread of the Roxy scene, and enlisted the help of French journalist and Roxy regular Bernard Zekri to produce a French hip-hop song. Zekri’s French-speaking American girlfriend, Ann Boyle, taught Fab Five Freddy the lyrics, and they both took passes, Fred’s on the A-side, Boyle’s on the B-side. “Change the Beat,” by Beside & Fab Five Freddy, became one of the first French-language hip-hop hits. Zekri eventually transported the entire Roxy crew to Europe—with Fab Five Freddy as ringleader—for his New York City Rap Tour, which lit up the continent.

Freddy’s record rippled, too. The woman who designed the record sleeve was a French photojournalist and graphic artist named Sophie Bramly. Bramly, a sultry, dark-haired Tunisian Jew, had been coming to New York since she was eleven years old and was a familiar face on the downtown scene. Bramly returned to Paris in the wake of “Change the Beat” and helped to produce the very first hip-hop TV show outside America. The show, called *Hip-Hop*, featured live performances and music videos, and became a huge hit in France while Michael Holman was still trying to get his own show, *Graffiti Rock*, off the ground in the States.

Freddy’s exclamation at the end of “Change the Beat” (“This stuff is reeeally freshhhhh!”) became the scratched backbone to another big record, the brainchild of Celluloid house producer Bill Laswell. A collaboration between jazz pianist Herbie Hancock and Roxy DJ DST, “Rockit,” scored another huge European pop hit. The song had a narrower impact in America—it went to number one on Billboard’s club play chart—but it garnered five trophies at the first annual MTV Video Music Awards in 1984.

Songs like “Buffalo Gals,” “Change the Beat,” and “Rockit” all rippled out from the Roxy parties, but they were one-hit wonders, musical stepstones in hip-hop’s journey into the American mainstream and global consciousness.

Rick Rubin, however, was about to take his Roxy experiences and turn them into something with lasting impact.

It was long past midnight when Rick Rubin and his friends returned to his dorm room from one of their nightly club crawls. Rubin threw a rap record on his turntable, and the guys joked and hollered over the music blasting through Rubin’s huge Cerwin-Vega speakers.

Suddenly Nancy Heller—the girl that Rick Rubin referred to as “that Hell-bitch”—burst into the room, shrieking over the pounding music.

“You fucking idiots! I can’t stand you anymore!”

Rubin and his friends stopped laughing. Heller looked crazy, standing in the middle of the room in a T-shirt and shorts, her face beet red, her hair wild. Rubin and his friends—most of them big, beefy guys—froze for a moment of real fear.

“You motherfuckers!”

Rubin, whom Heller called “Rick the Prick,” was the first to bolt from the room, his heavy steps followed by those of Sean Travis, Warren Bell, and the rest of the guys. They left Rubin’s younger roommate, Adam Dubin, to face the enraged woman’s wrath alone.

Nancy Heller was mad only because she had been driven to madness by Rubin over the course of one torturous semester.

Rick Rubin lived in the B wing of Weinstein dorm, room 712. Heller lived in 812. Like Rubin, Heller had enrolled at NYU in part to be closer to the music scene, albeit one of a different sort. She regularly sang and played guitar at folk clubs like Speakeasy and Gerde’s Folk City. But Heller’s sleep and study times seemed to directly coincide with Rick’s nocturnal, three-digit-decibel sonic booms of rap and punk. Heller found that she lived atop a virtual beat box.

Over the weeks, Heller tried phoning Rubin. She tried knocking on his door. After that, Heller complained to the resident assistants and the front desk. Nobody, it seemed, would help her. Nobody would do *anything* about Rick Rubin.

Finally, Heller resorted to banging on her floor.

Rubin returned the gesture by turning up the volume.

Heller banged some more.

Rubin turned on his old upright vacuum cleaner and began rolling it along the ceiling, to howls from Dubin and friends.

Moments later, Heller exploded through the door, livid, sending the big boys scrambling into the hallway.

The administration couldn’t ignore this incident: One student had invaded another’s room. The dorm committee announced that they would be

convening a rare "student court" to get both sides' stories and determine a course of action. The potential repercussions were serious for both Heller and Rubin: They might be kicked out of the residence hall. But for Rubin and his confederates, the whole episode was occasion for farce. Before the trial, Rubin, Dubin, and friends replayed the incident until they had spun their story to ridiculous new heights.

"Did you see her come in?"

"She had something silver in her hand."

"It could have been keys."

"I thought it was a knife!"

"It probably was a knife!"

On the day the student court assembled in the basement recreation room of Weinstein Hall, Nancy Heller, the political science student on her way toward law school, seemed to have a distinct advantage over Rubin, who studied film. But Rubin's parents always thought he would make a great lawyer, and during the trial, he would prove them right.

Rubin told the court that he thought Nancy Heller was brandishing a weapon, and that he and his friends feared for their lives. To address Heller's complaint about the excessive noise, Rubin drafted an equally audacious defense.

"Punk rock and hip-hop are my art form," Rubin said. "They necessitate volume. There is no such thing as acoustic punk rock, or acoustic hip-hop."

Rubin contended that his DJing at high volumes was directly relevant to his course of collegiate study and burgeoning music career, and thereby as legitimate a need as, say, a political science student's need for quiet.

Rubin's friends corroborated his story. Even the nighttime desk clerk—a rotund, balding graduate film student named Ric Menello—testified on his behalf.

"She has been persecuting him for no reason I can understand," Menello said of Heller. "He plays his stereo quite low. Someone would have to have extrasensitive hearing like a dog, like *Superman*, to think it was too loud." Menello's affidavit added his belief that Nancy Heller was "unstable."

Menello's allegiance had been long since secured by Rubin through countless late-night food orders and conversations at Menello's desk. For cold cash, Menello regularly ghostwrote the term papers that kept Rubin in good

academic standing, even though the sophomore rarely attended classes. Menello routinely ignored or deflected complaints about the noise from 712-B, once writing a report that stated, "Rick Rubin is the kindest, sweetest, quietest student in the dorm . . . the most cooperative young man."

Rubin had Weinstein Hall locked up. He was their party planner, their caterer, their DJ. If you were close enough to Rubin, you got to roll with him to CBGB and the Roxy. You got to be a part of the in crowd wherever Rubin roamed. Then he treated you to late-night grub at Cozy Soup 'n' Burger on Broadway, on his ample allowance. Rubin and his "7B Mafia" threw parties in the rec room and hung around the front desk until the wee hours as Menello spouted film theory for the rapt undergrads.

Against Rubin's hegemony, Nancy Heller never had a chance. At the conclusion of the trial, the committee decided that Rubin could stay—provided that he keep the volume under a certain threshold. Heller moved out shortly thereafter.¹

Rick Rubin was accustomed to complete freedom, the kind that Mickey and Linda Rubin afforded him—the kind that didn't work so well in a crowded dormitory. He slept when he felt like sleeping and stayed up until he tired, usually the crack of dawn. Rubin's younger roommate, Adam Dubin, had a nine a.m. class on Friday mornings, and Rubin took it almost as a personal offense.

"Ohhhh!" Rubin exhaled, like a balloon deflating. "How could you do that?!"

Rubin soon freed his young friends, too, and they began staying up with him to watch reruns of *The Abbott and Costello Show* at four thirty in the morning.

Rubin adored this program, and his whole college life seemed to be one extended routine inspired by the show. To most people, Abbott and Costello represented unsophisticated slapstick. But Rubin's hearty laughter in the

¹Nancy Heller claims that the student court actually ordered both her and Rubin to move simultaneously, but Adam Dubin and Ric Menello insist that Rubin remained in the room for some time. If the court ruled as Heller claims, and Rubin wasn't forced to move, then it is another example of the double standard that Heller now claims was a life lesson that guides her current law practice: "Life isn't always fair," she said. "Just because you're right doesn't mean you win."

wee hours was provoked more so by the surreal, absurdist cruelty of "Bud" Abbott toward his dim-witted partner: *Abbott slaps Costello. Costello tries to defend himself. Abbott replies, "How dare you raise a hand to me!"*

Abbott always put his partner in situations where Costello was bound to fail, or left him quite literally holding the bag: *Costello buys a sack of tomatoes. Abbott picks the rotten ones out and throws them over his shoulder. Tomato hits landlord. Abbott slips away, leaving Costello with the tomatoes and a very angry landlord.*

"Abbott's gone," Rubin would deadpan, delighted.

Rick played the Abbott role with his own friends. He persuaded the lead singer of his high school band, the Pricks, to jump into the audience, pick a random person, stare him down, and then slap him for no reason at all. When Rubin's new band with his Weinstein friends, Hose, played City Garden in Trenton, Rubin goaded a friend to set off the sprinkler system with a lighter during their set. Like Abbott, Rubin loved to instigate chaos and then walk away—claiming ignorance, or indignance, or innocence. And, like Abbott, Rubin lived to feign indifference to suffering.

One evening, Ric Menello informed Rubin that a fellow student had been shot.

"That's horrible," Rubin replied. "What are we eating?"

During their late-night sessions at Weinstein's front desk, Ric Menello helped Rubin parse his sense of humor—why Rubin liked comedians like Abbott and Costello and Jerry Lewis, the bluster of pro wrestlers like Rick Flair, the braggadocio of rappers and the insolence of punk rockers. It wasn't the vulgarity alone, Menello suggested. It was the *combination* of extreme vulgarity *with* extremely sophisticated visual and verbal form. It's art that appears aimed at the cheap seats but also has appeal for the few people who truly see its complexity. Menello knew this to be true, because he had seen another side of Rick Rubin: the young man who revered the beauty of a perfectly executed work of art, the young man who cried at the simple woe of a Roy Orbison song.

"It's a highbrow-lowbrow game," Menello said, paraphrasing film critic Andrew Sarris. "Middlebrows beware."

This theory of "high-low"—paired with a disdain for the "middle," anything tame or tepid—guided Rick Rubin's artistic endeavors through college and beyond. Rubin aimed to create, in his words, "the worst shit." But he did it with the intention and all-consuming focus of an artist.

Rick Rubin learned to make records the same way he learned magic: He sought the counsel of people who knew the tricks.

Ed Bahlman was a magician of sorts. He ran a small record store and custom label out of his girlfriend's clothing boutique on 99 MacDougal Street, not far from Weinstein. He put out interesting, experimental music—some of which, like ESG's song "UFO," had become part of the growing hip-hop canon of breaks.

To Rubin, Bahlman was a hero: a guy with great taste who made only records that he really loved. So when Rubin decided to make a record with his punk band, Hose, he turned to Bahlman, who was generous with his advice. He recommended a cheap recording studio for Rubin to mix his record, Power Play in Queens; a place to get his "master discs" cut; a record plant in Canada that would manufacture vinyl from those masters at a low price; and a press in Brooklyn where he could get labels printed. Finally, Bahlman agreed to wholesale the records through 99's already established network of small record stores and distributors.

Rubin recorded Hose's satirical, dirge punk on the cheap, playing the guitar and, on occasion, the vacuum cleaner from his altercation with Nancy Heller. But as ugly as Hose's music was, Rubin paid painstaking attention to the band's packaging and aesthetic. For Hose's first record, Rubin designed a cover inspired by the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian. For the second, Rick ditched traditional packaging altogether, opting for a plain brown paper sleeve, etching the song titles right into the vinyl where the paper label would have been. And even though Hose was a punk band, Rubin's growing fascination with hip-hop was evident, with phrases like "Smurf it up, y'all," referencing a new dance called "The Smurf," embedded in the grooves.

Another indication of hip-hop's influence was the name Rick chose for his record label, based on another bit of slang Rubin had picked up at clubs. When hip-hop fans liked a record, or a "jam," they might call it "fresh." If they really liked it, they might say that it was "death."

Rick Rubin, however, spelled the word "death" as it was pronounced.

Def Jam Recordings, operating out of room 712 of 5 University Place, was funded with Rubin's parents' money. His business plan was about art, not profit: sell just enough records so that he could afford to put out another. But Rubin was dogged in pursuing his affairs. He dragged Adam Dubin along when he made his rounds to record stores to check on his inventory. He booked Hose in local clubs and on a brief jaunt to California. Hose developed a reputation on the New York hard-core punk scene, alongside groups like

Murphy's Law, Reagan Youth, and the Beastie Boys—a quartet of middle-class city kids. Guitarist Adam Horovitz's father was a playwright. Vocalist Michael Diamond attended St. Ann's Prep School in Brooklyn. Bassist Adam Yauch attended Bard College. Drummer Kate Schellenbach, the sole girl among the "Boys," had been a child actor on Broadway.

Like Rubin, the Beastie Boys hung out at the Roxy, and dabbled in hip-hop. On a small punk label called Rat Cage, they had even done a quasi-rap song wherein Diamond repeatedly calls Carvel ice cream, home of the famous "Cookie Puss" cake, refusing to believe that "Cookie Puss" is not a real person.

Rubin loved the resulting track "Cooky Puss" so much that he made everyone in 7B request it repeatedly on the campus radio station, WNYU. Ruben befriended the boy Beasties, especially Adam Horovitz, who was entertained by Rubin's bluster, play-bravado, and penchant for saying cruel things for maximum comedic effect. Horovitz called Rubin a "dick," meaning it as a compliment. When the Beasties needed a DJ to help them play "Cooky Puss" live, they turned to Rubin, who had both the right equipment and, vitally, a bubble machine.

As Horovitz, Diamond, and Yauch shifted their creative focus to hip-hop, their need for their drummer lessened. Schellenbach was simply ignored out of the group and Rick Rubin became "DJ Double R," the fourth member of the Beastie Boys.

Rubin got the notion to make a rap record from "Sucker MCs," the first song Rick ever heard that captured the energy of live hip-hop. No band, just a drum machine, two MCs, and a DJ, scratching.

"This is the real shit," he enthused to his roommate, Adam Dubin.

Then he added: "I could do this better."

Rubin borrowed a Roland TR-808 drum machine from Horovitz and began programming beats. He wanted to make a record with the Treacherous Three—Kool Moe Dee (the MC name for Mohandas Dewese), Kevin "Special K" Keaton, and Lamar "LA Sunshine" Hill. Ruben had become friendly with Kool Moe Dee and Special K at Negril, and he invited them over to the dorm to hang out.

Rick Rubin still had a lot to learn about the record business. Special K informed him that the Treacherous Three were signed exclusively to Sugar Hill, and therefore couldn't appear on Def Jam. Rubin had a lot to learn about

Black people, too. He was baffled by Kool Moe Dee's request for some "lotion." *Lotion?* Rick puzzled. *What did he need lotion for?*—unfamiliar as Rubin was with the grooming needs of a dark-skinned guy trying not to look "ashy."

At Weinstein, Special K suggested an alternative. His older brother, Terry Keaton, worked at a pharmacy. But back in the day, Terry used to rap under the MC name of "T La Rock." A few weeks later, Special K brought his brother to Weinstein, and the older MC hit it off with Rubin right away. Together they recorded a cassette demo for the song that would become "It's Yours." Rubin booked some time at Power Play, inviting Jazzy Jay to DJ, and Beastie Boy Adam Horovitz to hang out.

Rubin had little experience in the recording studio. But he knew what he wanted to hear. Everything had to sound huge—the bass lower, the vocals sharper, the drums louder, the scratches explosive. He and the studio engineer experimented with recording each drum sound on multiple tracks, mustering as much magnetic real estate for them as possible. With Horovitz's Roland TR-808 drum machine plugged into the patch bay, Rubin turned a knob to detune the kick drum sound all the way down so that every time it triggered, it made a prolonged, hollow boom that shook the room.

Most important, Rubin wanted to conjure something that he hadn't yet heard in a rap record—parity between DJ and MC, in the same way that rock records might feature the singer and lead guitarist equally. So Rubin arranged breaks in T La Rock's lyrics, and in the spaces had Jazzy Jay cut not one, but two turntable parts—playing off each other almost as a rock band might have rhythm and lead guitar. Last, Rick Rubin gave equal billing to T La Rock and DJ Jazzy Jay.

Rubin intended to release "It's Yours" through 99 Records, but Special K informed him that Arthur Baker, the producer of "Planet Rock," was looking for music for the soundtrack to a new movie about hip-hop called *Beat Street*—a kind of Hollywoodized version of *Wild Style*.

Rick Rubin went to Baker's Shakedown Studios and got an audience with the producer, who nodded his head as the beat played.

"I like it," Baker said.

Instead of the soundtrack, Baker proposed releasing "It's Yours" as a single on his indie label, Streetwise, which recently launched New Edition as huge teen stars. Baker offered \$2,000 for the record, which would barely cover the recording costs. But Ruben didn't care too much about the money. Instead, he negotiated for branding: his Def Jam logo would be featured prominently on the label and cover.

Rubin designed the logo himself at the offices of Estée Lauder, where his aunt Carol worked. Installed at a workstation with plenty of tools and type, he spelled the words "Def Jam" in Helvetica, enlarging the "D" and "J" to make a hip-hop double-entendre. For the sleeve, Rubin had a friend trace a rendering of the tonearm for a Technics SL-1200, the turntable of choice for professional DJs. When finished, the artwork made an implicit statement. Other record companies made rap records for money. But Def Jam's name and packaging made a novel promise: it would be a label by and for hip-hop fans.

When Streetwise shipped the first 12-inches in late 1983, Rubin's promotional efforts consisted of taking the record to the Roxy every night and asking the DJs to play it. T La Rock had forgotten about the record altogether and went back to work at the pharmacy. After several months the record caught on, and even garnered some play on the mix shows of WRKS and WBLS. By then Rubin realized that he didn't know the first thing about promoting a rap record. Again, he sought the advice of someone who knew the tricks.

Aaron Fuchs was a former music journalist who covered rap almost as early as Nelson George and Rocky Ford had. His record label, Tuff City, achieved a first for a rap label: a production deal under the auspices of a major company, CBS. Fuchs put out a few singles by Spoonie Gee, the Cold Crush Brothers, and Davy DMX before the deal was pulled by executives who didn't see the value. Fuchs was independent again, but had returned with a lot of experience.

"It's very difficult to promote rap records," Fuchs told Rubin. "The only person who has ever had any success is Russell Simmons."

Rubin immediately recognized Simmons's name from his Run-DMC and Kurtis Blow records.

"Even though he manages a lot of people," Fuchs continued, "the only person he has ever actually really *worked* for is his brother, Run. If you could get Russell to focus on your record, he'd be the best person to do it."

After years of work, Michael Holman's hip-hop *American Bandstand* had arrived. Holman found a Wall Street partner, Steve Memishian, who put together a group of investors to fund a pilot for *Graffiti Rock*. Holman enlisted Kool Moe Dee and Special K to cohost the show with him; hired Afrika Bambaataa as his music consultant; and, through the good graces of

Russell Simmons, booked Run-DMC as his musical guests. Holman had to make some creative compromises with his producers, who had secured syndication for the pilot in eighty-eight markets across the country.

"You can't make it look too scary," they said.

So Holman made sure there were lots of White faces among the dancers, including two as yet unknown teens from the downtown scene, Debi Mazar and Vincent "Prince Vince" Gallo. In the spring of 1984, Holman taped *Graffiti Rock* at Metropolis, an East Harlem TV studio on the corner of 106th and Park.

In June, on the eve of their debut, Holman and Memishian threw a party at a club in Chelsea to celebrate the debut of America's first hip-hop TV show. The affair marked another milestone, too. It was at the *Graffiti Rock* party that Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons finally crossed paths.

Jazzy Jay facilitated the introduction, bringing Simmons over to meet the NYU student.

"This is Rick, who produced 'It's Yours,'" Jay told Simmons.

Russell stared in disbelief at the chubby, long-haired kid with the scruffy beard. After a moment, Simmons spoke:

"That's my favorite record. That's the best record in the world," Simmons said. "You didn't make that."

"Yeah," Rubin replied. "I did."

And then Simmons said, "I can't believe you're White."

Rubin was twenty-one, Simmons twenty-six. Rubin was a Jew from Long Island, Simmons Black and from Queens. But they liked the same kinds of records. Simmons's name was on almost all of Rubin's favorite hip-hop songs—from Jimmy Spicer's "Dollar Bill" to Run-DMC's "Sucker MCs." Both men shared a similar distaste for disco or any music that was "soft." It didn't take long for Rubin and Simmons to find that they were, much to their own surprise, very much alike.

In the wake of the *Graffiti Rock* party, two things happened.

First, despite encouraging ratings, Michael Holman and his producers couldn't sell their TV show. The various station managers from around the country gathered at the yearly convention of the National Association of Television Program Executives told Memishian that they already had *Soul Train* on their schedules. They didn't understand why they needed *Graffiti Rock*, nor did they comprehend the vast difference between the two shows.

Second, Rick Rubin pursued a friendship with Russell Simmons. He hung out at Rush's Broadway offices, and went with Simmons to Danceteria and Disco Fever. Soon enough, Rubin had Simmons promoting his artist T La Rock, whom Rush Management picked up as a client.

Despite the success of "It's Yours," Rubin hadn't seen a dime from Arthur Baker and Streetwise after the initial advance. To Rubin's surprise, Simmons's story was almost as bad. He had signed Run-DMC to Profile because Robbins and Plotnicki had a reputation for paying more than other independent labels like Sugar Hill did. But after selling hundreds of thousands of records for Profile, neither Simmons nor his artists were wealthy.

Simmons knew that Run-DMC's fortunes would have been different if he had signed them to a major label like Mercury. Mercury flew him and Kurtis Blow all over the world, and everywhere they went, the label's huge staff was there to greet them. Profile, on the other hand, could never support a staff of "regionals." And even with the stuff they could afford, Profile was stingy. It was a struggle to get Steve Plotnicki to pay for a taxicab ride or a hamburger.

Rubin suggested that labels like Profile weren't record companies at all. They were banks: They loaned you money to make a record, and then you had to pay them back with your sales. They didn't care about music.

"It's Yours" did bring Rubin one fateful windfall: His dorm room—now on the eighth floor—was flooded with demo tapes. In the summer before Rick Rubin's senior year, Adam Horovitz bunked with Rubin and listened to them. One stood out: a kid rapping with the macho, muscular energy of Melle Mel and the vocabulary of T La Rock. It made Rubin and Horovitz laugh, the juxtaposition of the huge ego with the pipsqueak voice. When the demo became as much a part of their regular rotation as their favorite records, Rick decided to phone the kid, who called himself LL Cool J. When the sixteen-year-old James Todd Smith came to Weinstein Hall, he didn't know what to expect. But he wasn't expecting what he saw.

"I thought you were Black," Smith blurted when Rubin met him at the front desk.

"Cool," Rubin replied.

Rubin played some beats for Smith on his drum machine—programmed by Horovitz—and within a few hours, they had recorded a cassette demo of a new song, "I Need a Beat." Days after that, Rubin plunked down some money to record the song at a nearby studio called Secret Society.

Rubin intended the song to be Def Jam's next release. But this time, he wanted a partner.

Rick Rubin took "I Need a Beat" to Rush's offices and played it for Russell Simmons, who loved it.

"What would you do with this?" Rubin asked.

Simmons shrugged. "I could give it to Profile."

"Why would you give it to them?!" Rubin said. "All you do is complain about how they don't do anything for Run-DMC. Why don't we just do it ourselves?" Simmons, after all, had made a dozen fantastic records for other companies and had little to show for it.

But Simmons didn't want to put out records himself. He didn't want to be Cory Robbins. He wanted a production deal with a major, like Rocky Ford and J. B. Moore had with Mercury, where they turned in records and collected a check, leaving the promotion and sales to others. Simmons was hoping an A&R man named Steve Ralbovsky would secure him a deal at EMI for a label he wanted to call Rush Records. Doing another label now would get in the way of that, Simmons said.

"It won't get in the way," Rubin insisted. "I'll do all the work. I'll do everything. You just be my partner."

Rubin was betting that if the records did well, Simmons would indeed put in work. He had seen Simmons talk people into submission on behalf of his acts. When Simmons promoted something, he was charming and funny, tireless and shameless. People liked him, and wanted to help him.

Rubin's words echoed in Simmons's ears after the college kid left. He talked it over with his lieutenants in the office, Heidi Smith and Tony Rome. Rubin was an incredible, beat-making motherfucker. The kid was coming to him, hit in hand. Maybe, if the records did well, their little company could leverage the major label deal he wanted.

Simmons asked his lawyer, Paul Schindler, to draft a partnership agreement. Simmons came in for half of Rick Rubin's label, Def Jam Recordings. Rubin's parents kicked in \$5,000, with the caveat that—if the company didn't work out—Rick would go to law school. Simmons contributed another \$1,000, and agreed to manage the acts—booking performances, getting publicity, and shaping their image.

Simmons had his work cut out for him with LL Cool J, who showed up in

the typical Sugar Hill-era "showbiz" getup—white lace-up boots and leather pants with leg straps.

"Where you from?" Simmons asked the young James Todd Smith.

"St. Albans," Smith replied, referencing a neighborhood close to Simmons's stomping grounds in Hollis.

"Where the fuck did you get those pants? Is that how they dress in St. Albans?"

Simmons had already begun crucial work for Def Jam. While Rubin concentrated on stripping the music bare—"reducing," as he called it, rather than "producing"—Simmons stripped their artists of artifice. Like Run-DMC, Def Jam's rappers would be marketed as a stylized version of who they actually were: regular kids in regular clothes.

Rubin now ran a record company out of his increasingly filthy, cluttered dorm room. He called on Tom Silverman, who guided the young producer to the right distributors for his records. Simmons introduced Rubin to Manny Bella at Profile, who gave Rubin lists of radio programmers and did a little promotion for Def Jam on the side. Rubin corralled Adam Dubin and another friend, George Drakoulis, to work for Def Jam as unpaid interns. Dubin and Drakoulis dropped boxes of vinyl at local distributors and picked up cash payments. They made the rounds to record stores. They called radio stations from Rubin's dorm room by day and handed 12-inches to club DJs at night.

With Rubin's focus and the addition of Simmons's influence with radio jocks like Red Alert, the success of LL Cool J's "I Need a Beat" came much sooner than it had with "It's Yours." In a few months they had sold 100,000 copies—a huge amount for a homegrown rap record.

But Rubin saw Russell's point: It wasn't easy doing it yourself, and it was very hard to collect from some big distributors. Rubin realized the truth in what folks like Silverman told him: A hit record could be the worst thing that happened to a small company. You could manufacture all those records and go broke before you ever got paid a dime.

Over the next eight months, Rubin and Simmons came with six more singles, each enveloped in a maroon sleeve with the huge Def Jam logo.

The second single came from the Beastie Boys, who—at Rubin's suggestion—rapped their song "Rock Hard" over AC/DC's rock classic, "Back in Black." The Beastie Boys were a tricky proposition for Simmons.

Aside from the tourist rap of Debbie Harry, there had been no successful White MCs in hip-hop. Marketing the Beasties to a real hip-hop audience, a Black audience, would take dexterity and guts. They got jeered at the first gig that Simmons booked for them at a club deep in the Queens ghetto. Simmons policed their style as he had with LL Cool J. Rubin had dressed the Beastie Boys in identical red tracksuits. Simmons knew that the Beasties looked as if they were mocking Black kids.

Dress like you really dress, Simmons insisted. The Beasties ditched the matching costumes, and donned their jeans and T-shirts.

The Beastie Boys record sold well, and the Def Jam singles kept coming: another track from LL Cool J; a record from Simmons's client Jimmy Spicer; and one from Run-DMC's new protégés, Hollis Crew. Quickly, Def Jam became known to radio and club DJs as a label that lived up to its name.

With T La Rock angry that Streetwise hadn't paid him any money, Jazzy Jay became a solo artist, composing a new track, itself called "Def Jam." But the real ode to the label appeared on the B-side: "Cold Chillin' in the Spot" captured the chemistry between the company's two founders.

Russell Simmons was high when he and Andre "Dr. Jeckyll" Harrell dropped by the studio where Rubin and Jay were recording. Summoning his inner Bud Abbott, Rubin told Simmons that it would be a *really good idea* for him to get on the microphone. Rubin watched his partner through the soundproof glass as Simmons began—not rhyming, but rapping nonetheless: "Now, I ain't never sung before, I'm a manager. I like to manage a lot of groups that talk on records," Simmons said. "We gonna save a lot of money because we ain't gotta hire nobody to say nothin'. And we keep all the money."

Rubin doubled over behind the mixing console. In the months since their first meeting, the college kid from Long Island and the hustler from Queens had formed a bond that would ultimately prove stronger than their musical connection: They made each other laugh.

Simmons continued, calling out to "the Doctor" in the house—Dr. Jeckyll, that is—who had become his friend and business partner. Simmons joked that he couldn't ask Harrell to join him on the microphone for fear of being sued by Profile Records.

"So I'm just gonna rap myself and keep all the money. Me and Rick—look at Rick laughing!—we gon' keep all the money!"

Back at NYU, Rubin was four credits short of the minimum required for his diploma. He won an exception to the rules in the same way he had obtained many others from the institution: a long letter, ghostwritten by Ric Menello. In this final appeal, Rubin argued that he had gained much experience from the university, and had during his years there already become a successful record producer. Furthermore, Rubin pledged, he would always remember to mention New York University as the place where he learned everything.

Rick Rubin graduated in May of 1985.

That was not the final concession Rubin wrested from the institution. He also got to stay at Weinstein for the entire summer after graduation, rent-free. Rubin reminded the administration that they never repaid his expenses for a controversial wet T-shirt contest he promoted as the head of the dorm's party planning committee, when female students protested the flyers that he had made for the occasion.

The leaflets read, "Bodies for Sale."

Rick Rubin wasn't the only college student in New York for whom hip-hop aspirations superseded academic achievement.

In a classroom at Adelphi University, only a few miles from Rubin's childhood home on Long Island, an undergraduate student named Andre Brown nodded off to sleep.

"Mr. Brown!" Professor Andrei Strobert boomed.

"Yes!" Brown said, snorting awake.

"We all appreciate the fact that you have to work for an education," Strobert said. "But could you please refrain from snoring so loudly so I can get the lesson to the people who want to listen?"

Brown's friends laughed. Bill Stephney, Carlton Ridenhour and Harold Allen McGregor all came to Strobert's class every Monday morning exhausted.

Stephney was the program director of Adelphi's student radio station, WBAU-FM, hosted a weekly rap and dance music show as "Mr. Bill," and interned during the week at a commercial rock station, WLIR.

Brown threw parties all over Long Island as one half of the Concept, performing as "Dr. Dre" alongside his former high school football teammate Tyrone "T-Money" Kelsie.

Ridenhour worked with the most successful DJ crew on Long Island,

Spectrum City, run by the Boxley brothers, Hank and Keith. A graphic design student, Ridenhour started drafting Spectrum's flyers, but had become Spectrum's main MC, Chuckie D.

McGregor, a budding photographer and writer, hung out with the crew, but couldn't make it to the Friday-night parties because he was an observant Seventh Day Adventist.

The four students comprised an informal hip-hop fraternity. At WBAU, they stayed long after Stephney's shift on the Mr. Bill Show to debate hip-hop, rock, and R&B. In Professor Strobert's class, Black Music and Musicians, they gained perspective on the music they loved. Strobert was one of the few older folks who took hip-hop seriously, who saw the genre as a natural and worthy step in the evolution of Black American music. The four young Black men had gotten into hip-hop because it was fun. But they were beginning to sense that it was important, too.

The intellectual approach to hip-hop came naturally to Bill Stephney, who arrived at Adelphi with a scholarship from the National Urban League. A former Long Island spelling bee finalist, Stephney had been dubbed "DJ Brainiac" by his high school friends. Stephney inherited much from his father, Ted, whose intellect and refinement allowed him to climb from the mailroom of Time, Inc., into a position as a photo editor for *Sports Illustrated*—a nearly impossible ascent for a Black man in 1950s corporate America. Ted Stephney passed his skills for navigating the wider, whiter world to his son. Bill's childhood in suburban Hempstead was spent partly with his Black friends in the neighborhood—becoming Blacker by the year as White families fled—and partly with White kids in the Police Boys Club bowling league.

Black kids on Long Island grew up with racial duality: proximity to White people and estrangement from them. Suburbia was supposed to be the place where they could be just like other American kids. Even a trip to White Castle was different for Stephney and friends than it was for local White teens like Rick Rubin. One night, as the WBAU crew munched on hamburgers and loudly debated music in the parking lot of the fast-food franchise near Adelphi, police swarmed in with cruisers and a helicopter because they had received reports of a "riot" in progress. Stephney, Brown, Ridenhour, and McGregor didn't grow up in the hardscrabble ghetto that Melle Mel described in "The Message," but their awareness of White supremacy was just as acute. That racial consciousness seeped into their approach to hip-hop.

Bill Stephney's Monday-night WBAU broadcast, "The Mr. Bill Show,"

became the suburban equivalent of Mr. Magic's show on WHBI. As WBAU's program director, Stephney gave a slot to Chuck Ridenhour and his DJ partners from outside of Adelphi, the Boxley brothers; one play of a record on their "Super Spectrum Mixx Show" could provoke a run on local stores. WBAU became a favorite stopover for established rap artists like Run-DMC, who befriended the collegiate crew of hip-hop mad scientists. The most popular songs on WBAU weren't even records but demo tapes of local crews and on-air promos made by the DJs to advertise their own shows. The Townhouse Three's "Straight from the Back of the N-41," a reference to a local bus route, was a favorite. One of Hank Boxley's childhood friends, Rico Drayton, recorded a manic hip-hop demo called "Claustrophobia Attack." Drayton billed himself as "MC-DJ Flavor," and Stephney gave him his own show, too. Together, Chuckie D and Flavor cowrote their own, widely requested promo called "Public Enemy #1."

When he graduated Bill Stephney wanted to be a radio DJ or a program director like Frankie Crocker. But at the rock station where Stephney interned, WLIR, the owners—two Jewish men named Elton Spitzer and Zim Barstein—had other ideas for their protégé.

"You're going to learn sales," they declared. "That's where the money is."

Spitzer and Barstein taught Stephney about traffic and commercial spot loads. They took him to meetings with advertising clients. They brought him on a pilgrimage to Laurel, Maryland, the home of Arbitron, the company that compiled radio ratings all over the country.

At first Stephney likened the training to being force-fed spinach. But slowly, the years at WLIR set Bill Stephney on a different path from his crew at WBAU: He would be a businessman first and an artist second. While Andre "Dr. Dre" Brown and Carlton "Chuckie D" Ridenhour planned recording careers, Stephney decided he would work from within the industry to further the cause of hip-hop. Just three credits shy of graduation, Stephney left Adelphi, bequeathed his radio shift to "Dr. Dre", and took a job at the *College Music Journal*.

At CMJ, Stephney founded the very first national chart to track rap airplay in the entire music business. He assembled his weekly chart by polling a panel he had created of DJs from commercial stations—like Red Alert of WRKS—and from college and community stations across the country. Stephney's column and chart, called "Beatbox," became a helpful gauge for the performance of rap records for the folks at Profile and Tommy Boy.

Stephney held a special affection for one record company, a new outfit

that had released seven fantastic singles on maroon-colored labels. When Stephney took the train into the city to visit the company's offices, located in a dorm room at NYU, Rick Rubin and George Drakoulias felt familiar to him, just like the White guys Stephney grew up with in the bowling league, except that Rubin and Drakoulias liked rap in the same way Stephney had come to appreciate rock.

Rubin saw in Stephney a kindred spirit. Most of the people Rubin met in the business seemed sleazy. Stephney was bright and pure—a student and a fan, just like he and George were. Rubin had big things planned for Def Jam, and he made a mental note to include Stephney in them when the time came.

Meanwhile, a demo tape produced by Stephney's friend Andre "Dr. Dre" Brown had made its way to Rubin via the guys in Run-DMC. Rubin invited Brown to the dorm, and signed him and Tyrone "T-Money" Kelsie to Def Jam as "Original Concept."

It would be almost a year before Def Jam would release that demo as a single called "Can U Feel It." By that time, the signature maroon label had turned black, and Def Jam had become a much bigger enterprise than even Rubin had envisioned.

It seems absurd that a tiny record company with just a handful of singles in its catalog would, within one year, inspire the story line of a major motion picture and land a multimillion-dollar production deal with the most prestigious record conglomerate in the world.

But that is exactly what happened to Def Jam in 1985.

It began with an article in the *Wall Street Journal*. Meg Cox, a reporter hired to cover new trends in the arts, received a tip from Rocky Ford about some incredible developments in the rap world: the first corporate-sponsored national stadium tour, the Fresh Fest; the first group to achieve a gold album, Run-DMC; and the rise of the twenty-seven-year-old artist manager with the seventeen-client roster at the center of it all, Russell Simmons.

Cox joined Simmons on one of his nightly expeditions to the Disco Fever in the South Bronx where she had her first experience of being frisked for weapons before entering a nightclub. Simmons rather enjoyed guiding the reporter through this strange world.

"You are the Whitest person I have ever met," Simmons told Cox, whom he affectionately dubbed "the Ivory Snow Queen." In her seventeen-hundred-word front-page article about the emerging rap scene for the *Wall Street*

Journal on December 4, 1984, Cox came up with a nickname for Simmons, too. She called him "the mogul of rap."

Menahem Golan, the fifty-five-year-old Israeli-born head of Cannon Films, read the article on a flight from New York to London. When he landed, he called his New York office and ordered them to track down this "mogul of rap," Russell Simmons.

Golan made his reputation producing Charles Bronson and Chuck Norris movies, but he had also been the first person in Hollywood to latch onto the break dancing "craze," with his films *Breakin'* and *Breakin' 2*. These low-budget exploitation flicks were derided in the hip-hop world. When Russell Simmons agreed to meet with Golan, Simmons expected the worst.

Golan did not disappoint. He came across to Simmons as every bit the stereotype of the cigar-chomping, vulgar movie producer. Golan wanted Simmons to procure the talent for the film—to be called, of course, *Rappin'*—and he wanted a rushed script and shoot to get the film out in time for the spring of 1985.

Simmons had turned down better ideas than this, like the previous year, when Harry Belafonte and Stan Lathan approached him with the idea for their movie, *Beat Street*. While *Beat Street* wasn't exactly Russ's idea of a real hip-hop film, it was infinitely more respectful than Golan's proposed quickie flick, designed to cash in on rap before the fad inevitably died.

"If I make the wrong movie with you," Simmons said, "I'm going to destroy everything I spent years building." Simmons passed, and Golan moved on.

Simmons's principled stand against Golan got a little easier when another Hollywood producer who read the *Wall Street Journal* story took a run at Simmons, literally, in the lobby of the building where he was meeting with Golan.

The producer, George Jackson, was more to Simmons's liking. He was Black, energetic, and in his twenties. Better still, Jackson was originally from Harlem and had made films for comedian Richard Pryor. Jackson introduced Simmons to his production partners—another young Black producer named Doug McHenry; and Michael Shultz, the director of two Pryor films, *Car Wash* and *Which Way Is Up*, and another Simmons favorite, *Cooley High*. The three producers had seen the Fresh Fest when it came to Los Angeles, and they pitched Simmons on a documentary about it called *Rap Attack*.

Simmons instead proposed a fictional feature about the New York rap scene starring Run-DMC. After they came to an agreement with Simmons, the producers set up funding and distribution through Warner Bros. Pictures, and hired a young Black TV writer named Ralph Farquhar to craft a script. Simmons suggested a story loosely based on Junebug, the former lieutenant to DJ Hollywood and star jock for Sal Abbatiello's *Disco Fever*, who had become a drug dealer and subsequently been murdered. Farquhar returned, however, with a tale of a young White girl trying to break into the music business. Simmons hated this blatant surrender to sensibilities that his partner Rick Rubin might have called "middlebrow."

Starting over, the producers settled for the story unfolding right in front of them. Hadn't they been hanging out for months with Simmons and Rubin as they built their cool, independent label, Def Jam? In the revised script, the name of the company was changed to Krush Groove, but the main characters' names, Rick and Russell, remained—a saga about two hip-hop entrepreneurs who, after an unsuccessful search for legitimate financing, eventually turn to ruthless gangsters for money.

Except for the part about the gangsters, it wasn't far from the truth. Simmons and Rubin both were now actively seeking a distribution arrangement for Def Jam with a major label. The movie deal with Warner Bros. opened up an opportunity for Simmons and Rubin to take a meeting at the company's sister record label in California. Warner Bros. Records' affable chairman, Mo Ostin, seemed interested. But as the music played, the blank White faces of Ostin's vice presidents and A&R staff showed that these people understood nothing about rap music.

Upon his return to New York, Simmons got a surprise call from Steve Ralbovsky, his friend from EMI Records. Ralbovsky explained that he had taken a new job at Columbia Records, the flagship label of Warner's rival, CBS. He wanted to know if Simmons would come in for a meeting.

By the mid-1980s, the record business had consolidated into six "major" record companies. Warner Music comprised three labels: Warner, Elektra, and Atlantic. CBS had two: Columbia and Epic. Polygram ran Mercury. EMI ran Capitol. RCA distributed Arista, and MCA had a subsidiary called Uni, short for Universal, the movie studio owned by MCA Records' parent company.

But in the five years since Mercury became the first major-run label to release a rap record—Kurtis Blow's "Christmas Rappin'"—all of these companies treated rap much as Menahem Golan did: a passing fad.

In the majors' absence, strong independent labels like Sugar Hill, Tommy Boy, Profile, and Jive thrived, selling millions of records.

Finally one executive sniffed opportunity.

"I can't walk twenty feet in Manhattan without seeing a kid with a boom box playing rap music," Columbia Records' general manager Al Teller told his A&R chief, Mickey Eichner. "What's the story here?"

Eichner shrugged. Teller turned to the A&R executives in Columbia's Black music department, who derided rap as "a ghetto thing," not dignified enough for a serious label like Columbia.

But Al Teller persevered, eventually asking Eichner the right question, a question that no executive before him ever had:

"Find whoever's really good at this and bring them in."

Eichner landed on Tom Silverman and Tommy Boy Records. Eichner hadn't noticed that Silverman didn't currently have a breakthrough rap act; since "Planet Rock," Silverman had ventured further into electro-funk and dance music. And Eichner couldn't have known that Tommy Boy was, in fact, struggling for its life—Silverman was \$500,000 in debt to his manufacturers after the closing of a few distributors who owed him money.

Nevertheless, Eichner sold Teller on the idea of Tommy Boy. They called in their new A&R man Steve Ralbovsky to hear a record from Tommy Boy's latest act, the Jonzun Crew. When Ralbovsky finally understood what his bosses were getting at, he told them straight out:

"I've got another idea for you."

Ralbovsky told Russell Simmons to prepare a presentation for the CBS executives. The meeting was the exact opposite of the Warner Bros. Records debacle. Simmons, loquacious and animated, didn't just present Def Jam as a label. He laid out, in passionate detail, the entire scene of which he had become the undisputed master—from Run-DMC to Whodini, from the Fresh Fest to *Krush Groove*. Simmons insisted that rap music couldn't be understood simply as Black music. It was *teen* music.

If this was rap, then Teller, Eichner, and Ralbovsky were rapt—sold on the idea before Simmons even finished talking.

Rick Rubin hadn't made the Columbia meeting. He was preparing to play himself in *Krush Groove*, now in preproduction at Silvercup Studios in Queens. As for Simmons, the producers wanted more of a leading-man type

to play the role of "Russell." Simmons and Rubin suggested the dark, suave Fab Five Freddy for the role, but Jackson, McHenry, and Shultz selected a clean-cut, brown-skinned twenty-one-year-old named Blair Underwood for the part.

Rubin and Simmons began to see *Krush Groove* as a parade of concessions to commercialism. Another was the casting of Sheila E.—a talented and beautiful protégée of Prince, whose *Purple Rain* movie and soundtrack had been huge for Warner Bros. the previous year. But as a leading lady, she was the antithesis of the stripped-down, unpretentious street aesthetic of the rappers with whom she shared the screen. Even worse, Simmons felt that the producers were slowly pushing Run-DMC's story line to the side in favor of comic relief from the Fat Boys, due in part to the persistence of Charlie Stettler. Simmons later discovered that Stettler had cut a deal with Jackson to helm an upcoming Fat Boys movie, and suspected that Jackson's stake in that new venture was reason enough to make the Fat Boys more prominent in *Krush Groove*.

On the set, Rubin could scarcely contain his frustration. As Michael Shultz coached Underwood and Run on some dialogue, Rubin stepped in front of the director.

"No! That's *not* how it goes," Rubin shouted. "*This* is how it goes!"

Shultz put his arm around the young record producer and walked him away from the others. I'm *the director*, Shultz lectured the recent graduate.

"I'm really sorry," Rubin said, shifting back into his calm voice. "But it was making me really mad. Because once you put it on film, that's the way it's gonna be. And it's gonna be wrong."

The two men walked back over to the two actors and waiting crew.

"Do what Rick said," Shultz ordered.

Ultimately, the movie was out of Rubin's control. So, too, was the soundtrack, which was set to conclude with an "all-star" rap song featuring Run-DMC, the Fat Boys, Kurtis Blow, and Sheila E. Rubin hated the track that Kurtis Blow put together; he thought it was goofy. Instead, he produced a separate section of the song for Run and DMC—with whom he had grown close—to protect the group's credibility. To protect his own, Rubin insisted that the credits show he had produced *only* Run-DMC's portion.

Still the *Krush Groove* soundtrack featured two new songs by LL Cool J and the Beastie Boys. Ironically the first major-label appearance by Def Jam artists would be with the company that rejected them, Warner Bros. Records. In another irony, the *Krush Groove* soundtrack proved a boon to

the label that lost out to Def Jam at Columbia, the struggling Tommy Boy Records.

Monica Lynch, Tommy Boy's newly anointed president, began dating Doug McHenry during the production of the film, and kept ribbing her new boyfriend to include Tommy Boy's new doo-wop-hip-hop hybrid group, the Force MDs, on the soundtrack. Their moment came when Warner failed to strike a deal for New Edition to record a "love theme" for the movie. Lynch hurried the Force MDs off to Minneapolis to record the song with two hot new producers, Terry Lewis and Jimmy Jam, also former protégés of Prince. "Tender Love" became the first Top 10 pop single for Jam and Lewis, and the first for Tommy Boy as well, which retained the singles rights—skillfully negotiated by Tom Silverman with Warner chairman Mo Ostin.

The success bought Silverman time and the esteem of Ostin as well.

While Paul Schindler hammered out the fine points of the Def Jam-Columbia agreement, Russell Simmons regularly shared his progress with a person he knew he could trust.

Ann Carli knew that a distribution deal with a major label wasn't necessarily a ticket to paradise. Carli fought constantly to keep Jive's acts a priority for Arista's promotion staff. Arista's head, Clive Davis, had even tried to stop the release of Billy Ocean's album because he thought the record wasn't good enough, and because his staff thought Ocean "ugly." Billy Ocean's album went on to sell over two million copies, and Davis reaped the benefits in spite of himself. The political and business aspects of the Jive-Arista deal required a deft hand, and Carli credited Jive's success to the genius of Clive Calder.

Carli worried for Simmons, and she asked Calder for advice. After all, smaller labels could do many kinds of deals with the majors. On one end of the spectrum, a "production deal" would give Def Jam less responsibility and a quick infusion of cash, but only a fraction of the profits. On the other, a "pressing and distribution deal" would give Def Jam the larger share of back-end profits and ownership of the "masters" (meaning that if the deal ended, Def Jam could take its records with it); but then Def Jam would have to risk its own cash and promote its own records. Carli knew that Calder liked Simmons and would probably tell him to go for less money up front in return for more of the back end.

"Tell Russell I'd be happy to spend a day with him," Calder said, offering to impart the benefit of his experience to the young artist manager.

To Carli's surprise, Simmons wasn't interested.

"That's okay," Simmons said.

Carli suspected that Simmons didn't want to look like he needed advice, especially now that she and Simmons had transformed their professional partnership into a personal one; a relationship that Carli tried to keep discreet, though without much help from Simmons.

In September of 1985, as *Krush Groove* was edited and prepared for release, Columbia and Def Jam closed their \$2 million production deal with a signature from Russell Simmons.

In the first year, Simmons promised to deliver four albums to Columbia—each needing approval by Ralbovsky and the Columbia brass. For each album, Def Jam received an advance and 14 royalty points, from which they had to pay their artists. All of the royalties were "cross-collateralized," meaning that profits from one artist's album could be used by Columbia to cover losses from another. And Columbia retained the all-important rights to the "masters," meaning that when the deal ended, Columbia owned the albums, not Def Jam.

It wasn't a generous arrangement by major-label standards. It wasn't even the first major-label production deal ever for a rap label—that place in history went to the small label owned by Aaron Fuchs, Tuff City. But it was the first deal of a magnitude that made a rap label a clear priority for a major company.

"I will be your project manager," Al Teller promised Rubin and Simmons, an indication of Teller's sincerity and Columbia's commitment. Notably, the Def Jam deal had come through the pop department, not the Black music department, which had been so negative about "ghetto" rap music from the start.

The two partners received a large advance in the form of a check for \$600,000. Rubin promptly photocopied the check and sent it to his parents, an ancient Jewish message that meant, translated roughly, "I'm not going to law school."

Def Jam and Columbia celebrated their marriage with a reception on the rooftop of Danceteria, catered by Rubin's favorite burger joint, White Castle. Rubin sent George Drakoulis out to Queens with an order for a thousand

hamburgers, and Drakoulias returned in a cab with White Castle boxes stuffed in the trunk and tied to the roof. Many of the burgers ended up on the guests after Rubin encouraged the Beastie Boys to start a food fight. While their new clip for "She's on It" was looped and projected onto the side of a building across the street, one of the cheeseburgers hit CBS Records chairman Walter Yetnikoff in the head. As Al Teller circulated through his party—an awkward mix of b-boys, scenesters, and buttoned-down CBS execs, he overheard a remark from one of his own people:

"Teller has lost his mind."

Columbia's chief competitor made a rap deal of its own shortly thereafter. The chairman of Warner Bros. Records, Mo Ostin, didn't just admire smart people; he liked to collect them. So Ostin bought half of Tommy Boy at a bargain price, saving the struggling venture, and he added Tom Silverman and Monica Lynch to his ever-growing list of vice presidents.

In 1985, two rap-oriented labels made the big time. No longer would Rubin and Silverman have to hound distributors around the country for the money to pay their bills. Instead, they would have to pester their new corporate benefactors to make their records a priority.

***Krush Groove* debuted in 515 theaters** across America on October 25, 1985.

Russell Simmons brought Ann Carli as his date to the New York premiere in Times Square. Carli showed up wearing a severely boxy blue corduroy suit. She was petite and pretty, but the outfit seemed to swallow her hundred-pound frame whole.

"Are you really wearing that?" Simmons asked.

"Yeah," Carli replied. "I made it last night." Carli liked to sew her own clothes, just for kicks.

"You *made* it?!" Simmons exclaimed. He didn't know anyone who made their own clothes, least of all in the record business.

"You know, I really love you," he told her.

Carli's outfit, however, may have confused Simmons's father, Daniel Senior, who somehow got the impression that Carli was his son's cleaning woman.²

²Perhaps because Simmons had recorded another rant on an LL Cool J song called "That's a Lie," about a Japanese girl who "cleans up behind me."

Russell was mortified. "Daddy, she's my date," he said.

Inside the theater, the movie's fictional characters were portrayed by many people in the real world of Rush and Def Jam. Rubin starred as himself, while Simmons was relegated to playing the bit part of a club owner. Charlie Stettler provided comic relief as a sleazy record executive named Beiker. Heidi Smith, Rush's receptionist, reprised her real-life role for the make-believe "Krush Groove Records." Andre Harrell and Alonzo Brown donned their Jeckyll and Hyde suits to participate in an on-screen audition, in which LL Cool J's appearance became one of the few unbridled moments in a relatively tepid movie.

Sal Abbatiello and the Disco Fever played a role in *Krush Groove* as well, with the Fever serving as the venue for the film's grand finale. In reality, the Disco Fever wasn't open for regular business anymore: The club had just been shut down by the city of New York for operating without a cabaret license. It was part of a crackdown on Abbatiello himself, recently arrested for gun possession and awaiting trial. Abbatiello's legal problems were the least of his worries. As it was almost a decade earlier, another wise guy was gunning for Sal after a perceived slight. Abbatiello wasn't taking any chances. He came to the *Krush Groove* set at the Disco Fever wearing a bulletproof vest.

Krush Groove grossed \$3 million in its first weekend.

Janet Maslin, critic for *The New York Times*, hated it, arguing that "rap music is infinitely more original" than the boring fare produced by Warner Bros. In the days and weeks that followed the film's release, newspapers and magazines linked the rap movie to a number of violent incidents—kids rushing the locked doors of one suburban theater, and a bloody brawl in which one young man pushed another through a plate-glass window.

"Movie Sparks New Teen Riot," read the headline in the *New York Post*.

It was one of the first instances of media coverage linking hip-hop and violence.

Not everyone in American media bought the connection. *Time* magazine even wrote their own rap about the movie's bum rap: "Now there've been fights at the Plexes, kids've got out of hand / But they must've spiked the sodas at the popcorn stand. Because this movie has the innocence of bygone years / Like the films of Fred (*Rock Around the Clock*) F. Sears."

But innocence is not what Rubin, Simmons, and Run-DMC really wanted. They despised Hollywood. They wanted "Holliswood," something

truer to their aesthetic. Rubin and Simmons vowed to do another Run-DMC movie, one that they would fund and control completely.

LL Cool J's first album, *Radio*, hit record stores in late 1985. Despite the album's title, the vaunted radio promotion department of Columbia didn't need to do much for it. The three singles that Def Jam issued in advance of the album, along with LL's appearance in *Krush Groove*, created anticipation for the teenage rapper among hip-hop fans, both urban and suburban. Ladies—girls, especially—loved Cool J, who became the first “heartthrob” rapper since Kurtis Blow. The record began selling copies in the tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands. By the end of the year, Columbia Records had made back all the money they spent on Def Jam's initial advance. Within months of signing, Al Teller and Steve Ralbovsky's groundbreaking deal was profitable for Columbia.

Everything about Def Jam's first full-length release was meticulous—from the artwork, to the liner notes written by Nelson George, to the music itself. *Radio* was not the first successful rap album, but it was perhaps the first album conceived as one, integral long-playing listening experience.

Success meant that Rubin and Simmons needed a staff. First, they tried to hire the best rap promotions man in the business, Manny Bella. But Bella was under a solid contract to Profile Records. Bella wanted to be loyal to Cory Robbins—and Profile didn't let people break contracts in any case. With Bella refusing to bite, Rubin remembered Bill Stephney of CMJ, and offered him the job. Rubin wasn't, however, offering any money.

Stephney told Rubin that he could easily make \$40,000 a year elsewhere. He was interviewing with Barry Mayo to be the music director at WRKS. Aaron Fuchs had already offered him a job at Tuff City. Why would he work for Def Jam for free? Besides, the label's situation was chaotic. They didn't even have an office. And every time he went to go meet Simmons at Rush, Simmons wasn't there.

Secretly, Stephney was dying to work for Def Jam, because he believed that Rick Rubin was making the most important music in the world: Black records with a rock aesthetic. Rap albums that stood up against the greatest albums of any other genre. All he needed was some sort of signal that Rubin was serious.

When Rubin finally offered him \$16,000 a year, Stephney took it. He

wasn't in it for the money, but for the thing that Professor Stobert always championed: making an impact.

Next, Simmons and Rubin asked Ann Carli to be Def Jam's president. Carli was flattered, but demurred. She could never leave Clive Calder. And frankly, she was too close to Simmons.

“I can't work for Russell,” Carli told Rush publicist Bill Adler. Adler understood. If she did, Russ would be chasing her around the desk all day.

Ann Carli was at Arista Records when someone informed her about a strange visitor: a guy at the front desk claiming he was from Rush Artist Management, trying to pick up a box of Whodini records. Carli went downstairs to investigate, and saw a tall, lumbering young man, who seemed to have a heavy speech impediment.

“I'm sorry,” Carli replied patiently. “I don't know who you are.” Carli got Simmons on the phone, who told her that the young man was indeed his employee.

Carli gave him the box of records. Later, she called Heidi Smith at Rush to talk about Simmons's new errand boy.

“I can't believe Russell hired a handicapped person!” Carli exclaimed. “That's really nice!”

But the young man who called on Ann Carli was of able mind indeed. Twenty-five-year-old Lyor Cohen talked the way he did because he was shuttled between America and Israel as a young child, his accent never quite settling on either English or Hebrew. And Cohen carried packages for Simmons because he had vowed to carry any load, great or small, to win the respect of his new boss.

The year prior, Cohen was a business-school graduate working an entry-level job at a minor outpost of Israel's national bank in Beverly Hills. He was bored. In his spare time, he promoted punk parties in Los Angeles at a run-down theater in Hollywood called the Stardust Ballroom. Cohen understood the crossover appeal of Run-DMC for his audience, and he rang Russell Simmons repeatedly to book the crew for a gig.

Cohen had placed Run-DMC on a punk-meets-rap bill at the Stardust that included the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Fishbone. On a \$700 loan from his mother, Lyor Cohen made \$35,000 for one night's work, more than his current annual salary. He quit his job at the bank. He moved to a nicer

apartment. He bought dinners for his friends. Cohen brimmed with confidence. *The shit was easy*. For his next show, Cohen booked another Rush artist, Whodini, as headliners. But Whodini wasn't a rock act like Run-DMC, and had no cachet with White hard-core fans.

As he stood on the sidewalk outside the Stardust, barely any tickets sold, Cohen's chest burned with an unbearable pain, somewhere below his heart and above his stomach. He lost everything he had that night.

Broke, Cohen grasped for a lifeline: his cursory relationship with Russell Simmons, and a feeling that Rush was on the cusp of something big. In one of their transcontinental phone calls, Cohen heard Simmons intimate that if Cohen came to work for him, he could take a piece of the company.

Cohen talked the proposition over with his mother and stepfather.

His psychiatrist stepfather, Dr. Phillip Shulman, said: "If you are going to uproot your life in such a tremendous way, there's a thing called a contract."

But his mother, a lawyer named Ziva Naumann, cut in: "You're young. Contract or no contract, what's the worst thing that can happen? If it doesn't work out, you'll come home."

When Cohen showed up at Rush's offices on 1133 Broadway, he was immediately disappointed. He had envisioned a marching-band welcome, some excitement about the arrival of a new partner straight off a plane from the West Coast. But nobody expected Cohen nor knew who he was. Simmons was nowhere to be found.

Simmons never recalled making an offer of equity to the stranger from Los Angeles. Even so, Cohen began interning for Andre Harrell. He proved himself useful almost right away: Run-DMC needed to catch a flight to Europe, and their road manager was on a drug binge and couldn't be found. Nobody responsible at Rush had a passport.

"I have one," Cohen said.

By the time Cohen finally called to tell his parents that he had made the journey to New York safely, he was already in Britain.

Run, DMC, and Jam Master Jay didn't quite know what to make of this clumsy-looking, awkward-talking fellow, whom they had previously met only in passing. "Girallama" is what DMC dubbed Lyor: a cross between a giraffe and a llama.

Cohen was an alien indeed. He was born in New York City to two Israeli immigrants. The marriage between his parents crumbled because of his father Elisha Cohen's increasingly abusive behavior. To get a divorce, Lyor's mother, Ziva, gave custody of her infant son to her husband, who promptly

dumped Lyor with a foster family in Israel. At the age of three Lyor was returned to his mother, who had resettled and remarried in Los Angeles. The young Lyor had to get used to a new country, a new language, a new father, new stepsiblings, and a new last name: Shulman. Years later, as a teenager at John Marshall High, Lyor was still an outsider—driving his mother's two-stroke Citroën around a city filled with muscle cars and convertibles, the only White kid hanging out at rap parties thrown by a mobile DJ crew called Uncle Jamm's Army. And when his mother divorced anew, Lyor lost a second father and the means to pay for college. His biological father, Elisha, would pay for Lyor's tuition only if his son separated from his mother yet again and reverted to his given family name. Lyor Shulman became Lyor Cohen again.

Lyor Cohen was used to being perpetually out of place. Now he was on the road in Europe with three hip-hoppers and their homeboy, a slow-moving roadie they called Runny Ray.

On a sweltering summer day in London, Run-DMC arrived to play their biggest gig in Britain, a matinee at the Electric Ballroom. The venue had no air-conditioning, and condensation dripped off of the walls and the ceiling. Even worse, by the time the crew got backstage, Runny Ray discovered that he had forgotten to bring the records that Jay used to supply the beats for Run and DMC. Cohen and Ray raced back to the hotel. No records. *The Schmuck left them at the last gig*, Cohen realized. And it was a Sunday. All the record stores were closed.

Riding back to the ballroom, Lyor Cohen felt that old pain returning, burning in his chest, somewhere below his heart and above his stomach. *This was a short career*, Cohen thought. He had failed Run-DMC, and he had betrayed Russell Simmons.

As Cohen walked inside the venue and looked over the crowd, he noticed something he hadn't seen before: *The crowd had brought their own Run-DMC records for the crew to autograph*. Quickly, Cohen made an announcement, and dozens of records were suddenly passed forward toward the stage. The show was saved.

From then on Lyor Cohen belonged in a way he never had before. Run and DMC trusted him. Jay taught him how to settle shows and collect money. Out on the road, Lyor was Run-DMC's tour manager; back at the office, Cohen found a way to make money for Simmons, and himself: He negotiated a huge deal for all of Rush's artists with Winterland, the largest manufacturer of tour merchandise in the world.

Rush was another family for Cohen, made all the more familiar by its dysfunction. And if Simmons was the father of this family, then Cohen was going to do anything to make sure he was the favorite son.

Simmons and Rubin ran their disjointed partnership in disparate places, with Simmons at Rush's Broadway headquarters, Rubin renting a loft apartment more than twenty blocks downtown, and Def Jam with no offices at all.

Rubin proposed they use a portion of the \$600,000 advance to purchase a building to house the two entities of Rush and Def Jam. They found an inexpensive brownstone on a run-down block in the East Village. The building at 298 Elizabeth Street had five floors, enough for offices, a recording studio, and—of prime importance for Rubin—on-premise residences for both him and Simmons, to keep them in sync.

Rubin envisioned 298 Elizabeth Street as a re-creation of the chaos, camaraderie, and close quarters of Weinstein. But the building was a mess and would take months to renovate. Rubin had lots of aesthetic requirements, too—walls of glass brick and polished hardwood floors. Neither Rush nor Def Jam could wait that long for office space, and neither Rubin nor Simmons had the patience to deal with the problem.

Instead, Lyor Cohen took action, renting a former dance studio on 40 East 19th Street. Half of the space was walled off as a residence, and since both Simmons and Cohen were looking for a place to live, Simmons ended up living with Cohen, not Rubin.

On his first day of work, Bill Stephney took his place at the new Rush/Def Jam offices along with Heidi Smith, Bill Adler, Lyor Cohen, and Andre Harrell, who would soon leave to start his own label, Uptown Records.

Cohen pounced on Stephney as soon as the young promotion man had settled in.

"Don't forget you're not only on the Def Jam team, you're on the Rush team, too," Cohen declared. "In fact, Whodini now needs a road manager. If you're not doing anything, you are going to go out with Whodini for the next two months. And then I want you to go out with Captain Rock," who was another Rush client.

An incredulous Stephney called Rubin, who hardly visited the Rush offices.

"I just want to figure out something here," Stephney said. "Who do I work for? Because Lyor wants me to road manage Rush acts."

"Fuck that!" Rubin bellowed, livid at Cohen's ham-handed attempt to hijack his new hire. "You work for Def Jam. You've got records to promote!"

Between Rush and Def Jam, management company and record company, the lines were always blurred.

What the two companies had in common was Russell Simmons.

What separated them were the differing agendas of Lyor Cohen and Rick Rubin.

Krush Groove had not only been a boon to Def Jam and Tommy Boy, but to Profile Records as well, which was promoting *King of Rock*, the second album from the movie's main musical act, Run-DMC.

Simmons and Larry Smith again employed the "Rock Box" formula—rock guitars over hip-hop beats. For the "King of Rock" video, Cory Robbins and Steve Plotnicki invested in a smart-looking, well-produced video, and hired another well-known TV personality, Larry "Bud" Melman, to add comic relief.

"You guys can't come in here; this is a rock-and-roll museum!" Melman laughed, before Run and DMC burst through the doors.

MTV played the video, and gave the group their own live concert special. Weeks later, Run-DMC became the first rap act on *American Bandstand*. They headlined Ricky Walker's second annual Fresh Fest tour, this time sponsored by Sprite. Run-DMC's album quickly went gold, selling more than 500,000 copies. "King of Rock" grossed more than \$2 million for Profile, still a small business with only eight employees.

Robbins and Plotnicki moved Profile to bigger offices across the street, and expanded their roster to include an instrumental synth-funk artist named Paul Hardcastle ("Rain Forest") and a new-wave rock group called Boys Don't Cry ("I Wanna Be a Cowboy"). Hip-hop had made Profile's fortune, and Run-DMC was undoubtedly the company's anchor artist. But Cory Robbins never conceived his company as a rap label, and he wanted Profile to be as diverse as any major.

One day, Cory Robbins got a call from his hero, Joel Whitburn, whose books of Billboard charts Robbins had been collecting since he was a boy. Whitburn had a question for *him*, about one of *his* artists! It was a thrill,

and Robbins called his friends as soon as he and Whitburn got off the phone. Robbins was tickled again when a young executive called from K-tel Records. K-tel, of course, was a famous company that compiled the hottest hit records from other record companies, and then sold the compilations on TV, with titles like *20 Original Hits!* *20 Original Stars!* The K-tel representative, Bryan Turner, was a young guy in his twenties, just like Robbins, trying to drag K-tel into the new age of rap music. Turner wanted to license Run-DMC's "It's Like That." But when Turner offered a mere five cents per track for every album sold, Robbins balked.

"Why would I do that?" Robbins asked. "I'm selling these records for two dollars a copy and making a dollar profit on each of them."

"Five cents is what we pay everybody," Turner replied.

They went back and forth for the better part of an hour, until Turner relented.

"I'll give you six cents."

Robbins had made an extra penny, and Turner had made a friend. The next time Turner came to New York, the two met up. Robbins took Turner to a local club, Pizza-A-Go-Go, and introduced him to Will Socolov, one of Robbins's close-knit group of indie label buddies. Socolov owned a tiny, avant-garde dance label called Sleeping Bag Records, which just had its own first rap hit, "Fresh Is the Word," by Mantronix.

Similar salvation befell another friend of Robbins. Fred Munao, whose ex-wife managed disco queen Donna Summer, founded Select Records to release cool rock 12-inch singles. Munao put out a rap record on a whim. It did nothing. Nothing, that is, until a DJ at WOWI-FM in Virginia Beach played the single's B-side, a song in which the group's three rappers vie for the affections of a girl named Roxanne. The group, UTFO, were still Whodini's dancers on the Fresh Fest tour, but now their record, "Roxanne, Roxanne," had gone Top 10 on the Billboard R&B chart, selling nearly a half million copies.

Even Eddie O'Loughlin, Cory Robbins's friend from Midland International Records, had found success with rap music. O'Loughlin had formed a label called Next Plateau, signing two young female MCs who called themselves Salt-N-Pepa.

Cory Robbins, Steve Plotnicki, Bryan Turner, Tom Silverman, Will Socolov, Fred Munao, and Eddie O'Loughlin all started their careers in the disco era, but hip-hop had made them successful. These young, Jewish-, Italian- and Irish-American entrepreneurs formed a brotherhood of sorts. All of them

were fighting to promote and sell rap records. Their shared experience as industry underdogs created camaraderie and a willingness to help one another and share information, an impulse that didn't exist for executives in the major-label world. Robbins and his friends formed a kind of "Rap Pack": They talked constantly. They hung out nightly. They ate together. They even vacationed together.

In December of 1985, Robbins, Turner, Socolov, and Munao all flew to the Club Med resort on Turks and Caicos. On the beach, under warm sunshine that glinted off of the turquoise Caribbean waters, they debated which of the two biggest rap acts in the business would end up being bigger: Run-DMC or the Fat Boys. Both acts had gold albums. Both had music and videos with great pop crossover appeal. Who would end up having the longer career? The vote was split evenly, with Cory Robbins coming down, of course, on the side of his own group.

In the end, it was no contest. Upon Robbins's return to New York, Run-DMC went back into the studio to record their third album. This time, they would be working with a new producer. Now that Rick Rubin was involved, Run-DMC was about to make some records, and break some, too.

Together, Russell Simmons and Larry Smith created Run-DMC's signature sound. But their partnership was always a struggle, with Simmons wanting less music and Smith desiring more. Therefore Rick Rubin was a more fitting partner for Simmons when it came time to create Run-DMC's third album, *Raising Hell*.

The album was recorded for Profile, but it had the big-beat Def Jam sound: fewer instruments and less melody, more cuts and scratching. In a new studio process, Rubin, Run, DMC, and Jam Master Jay took long pieces of real break records—like Bob James's "Take Me to the Mardi Gras" or "My Sharona" by the Knack—and ran them right in from the turntables and onto the tape. It was the closest that recorded hip-hop had come to the sound of the old park jams even if its legality remained questionable.

One of Run-DMC's favorite breaks happened to be the first two bars of Aerosmith's classic rock hit "Walk This Way." Rubin suggested that instead of rhyming their own lyrics over the original break, that they do a complete remake of the entire song with help from the rock band itself. Aerosmith, who had been hitless for many years, were game. Run and DMC, however, had to be convinced. Even in the studio, they resisted reciting Aerosmith's

lyrics, which they barely understood. At the urging of Rubin and Jam Master Jay, the MCs came around, and the song became the culmination of Run-DMC's continuing creative and commercial quest to equate rock with rap. Rubin knew instinctively that "Walk This Way" would make that point clear, even for the hardest of hearing.

Profile's video completed that campaign in visual form: Run-DMC and Aerosmith performing on opposite sides of a wall, each distracted by the other's "noise," until they break down the flimsy barrier between them and find that they are, in fact, singing and rapping the same tune. MTV added the clip immediately, as it spoke directly to the channel's own rock radio origins.

Cory Robbins and Manny Bella worked together to conquer pop and Black radio respectively, with Bill Stephney providing an assist at college stations. "Walk This Way" was the first rap song that many Top 40 and rock stations ever played, and it rose to number four on the pop charts—six notches higher than Aerosmith's original had in 1977. But not everybody liked the concept. Back in Aerosmith's hometown of Boston, disc jockeys at local rock station WBCN were bombarded with calls about the "niggers" ruining the rock group's greatest song.

The walls between rock and rap, Black and White, were coming down regardless. At Profile, Run-DMC's *Raising Hell* garnered the group new White fans, and quickly hit a milestone—the first platinum rap album in history, with sales of over one million units and showing no signs of stopping. Back at Def Jam, Rubin and Simmons had created a rarity in the music business—and in America: an interracial company, in terms of the people who owned it, who worked there, and the artists who called the label home. In addition to Black rap acts like LL Cool J, and Simmons's first R&B singer, Oran "Juice" Jones, Rubin had signed Def Jam's first nonrap act, the heavy-metal band Slayer. And now that his work with Run-DMC was done, he could turn his attention to finishing the first album from Def Jam's White rappers, the Beastie Boys.

Before the first sessions for the Beastie Boys album, Rick Rubin and his group obsessed over a new rap record out of Philadelphia. The record, pressed up by the artist, looked cheap. Even the text on the yellow label was handwritten, just like Rubin had done for his *Hose* single back in college. The beats were raw and big, and the audacity of the lyrics made them laugh,

about an MC who walks into a bar: "Got to the place, and who did I see? A sucker-ass nigga tryin' to sound like me. Put my pistol up against his head, I said, 'Sucker-ass nigga, I should shoot you dead.'"

The rhymes in "P.S.K." by Schoolly D weren't entirely new. More than twenty years earlier, in 1963, a folklorist named Roger Abrahams collected similar street poems in Philadelphia: "I walked in and asked the bartender, 'Dig, chief, can I get something to eat?' / He threwed me a stale glass of water and flung me a fucked-up piece of meat. / I said, 'Raise, motherfucker, do you know who I am?' / He said, 'Frankly, motherfucker, I just don't give a damn.' / I knowed right then that chickenshit was dead. / I throwed a thirty-eight shell through his motherfucking head."

These grisly rhymes were the sidewalk versions of the slick radio raps by Philadelphia DJ Jocko Henderson or New York's Frankie Crocker. Black men recited these tales of braggadocio and violence on street corners and bars—any place where females weren't present or decorum wasn't required.

Schoolly D's record marked the first time that these tough street raps made it to vinyl. Both extremely crude and wonderfully creative, Schoolly D's rhymes appealed directly to Rubin's love of the "highbrow-lowbrow" union he had discussed with Ric Menello back in college, and they inspired Rubin's work with Adam Horovitz, Adam Yauch, and Michael Diamond.

Since the summer that Rubin and Horovitz roomed together at Weinstein, ordering pea soup from Cozy Soup 'n' Burger and sifting through demo tapes, they had been writing rhymes designed to make each other laugh, each one more outlandish than the one before. The writing continued with Yauch and Diamond until the lyrics became a mixture of b-boy routines and boyish bombast. That these lyrics about "hip-hop body rockin'" and "busting caps" came out of the mouths of White boys made them sound all the more ridiculous.

The tracks that Rubin and the Beasties created matched that insanity. Songs began with one beat pattern; then a sudden break thrown in from a turntable would change everything. Rubin played with song structure—bridges, turnarounds, false endings—to maximize the element of surprise, something that had been a big part of rock production, but had never been done in recorded hip-hop.

Singles trickled out from the sessions for a full year prior to the album's release, building the crew's reputation with a skeptical audience. "Hold It Now, Hit It" floored Black fans who could scarcely believe that three White boys had made the record. By the time the Beastie Boys recorded what would

become leadoff single for their album, "The New Style," the lyrics had gone ridiculously over the top: "I've got money and juice, twin sisters in my bed. Their father had envy so I shot him in the head."

In the early morning hours after each Beasties session, Rick Rubin returned to his alma mater, the Weinstein dorm to sit with Ric Menello at the front desk. They were writing the script for the "real" Run-DMC movie that Rubin and Simmons envisioned in the wake of *Krush Groove*, based on a story called "Who Shot Runny Ray?" concocted by Bill Adler and Lyor Cohen: Run-DMC's roadie is murdered; the cops don't give a shit because he's Black; Run-DMC have to find the killer.

Night after night, Rubin and Menello crafted a dark comedy that invoked their "high-low" ethos: lots of excessive violence and racial epithets but executed as a sort of "urban spaghetti Western" in which the revenge fantasies of disempowered Black men could play out through the film's heroes, Run-DMC.

At least, that was how it was written.

The movie, however, would be helmed by a completely inexperienced director who hadn't been the most attentive student in film school: Rick Rubin.

Columbia president Al Teller found his self-inflicted role as Def Jam's unofficial product manager more headache than he imagined. Simmons and Rubin complained about everything, and his own people complained about Simmons and Rubin. The entrepreneurs didn't care for Columbia's process and didn't respect Columbia's priorities. Simmons was a screamer, and the artists' manager, Lyor Cohen, even more so.

Teller finally lost his cool in one tense meeting with the Def Jam partners. Simmons was yelling again. Teller climbed up on the conference room table, stood and screamed louder. Simmons then leaped onto the table himself to draw even with the executive. Bill Stephney and Rubin looked up in amused disbelief at the two men arguing near the ceiling.

But success seemed to calm everyone down.

By April of 1986 Def Jam's debut album, LL Cool J's *Radio*, had gone gold. By the summer Simmons scored his first number one R&B hit with a song from Def Jam's Oran "Juice" Jones called "The Rain."

And on the Rush side—now redubbed "Rush Artist Management"—

Run-DMC's *Raising Hell* reached double-platinum status and was heading ultimately for an unprecedented three million in sales. Run-DMC had the biggest-selling album in rap music history once again.

Simmons leveraged the popularity of Profile Records' star group for Def Jam's benefit when he sent the Beasties to open up for Run-DMC on their *Raising Hell* summer tour. Rubin stayed behind to mix the Beastie Boys album. Unable to fulfill his role on the road as "DJ Double R," he sent Original Concept's Andre "Dr. Dre" Brown in his stead. The Beasties were now an interracial group on an interracial bill, performing for multiracial audiences on a national tour. From the road, The Beasties called Rubin repeatedly to ask when their album would be completed.

"It will be finished," the perfectionist Rubin replied, "when it's good."

By fall the record was complete: fifteen tracks ranging from rap, to metal, to puerile punk pop. Rubin and the Beasties tossed around one proposed album title, *Don't Be a Faggot*, like a Weinstein-era joke, letting the threat dangle for a while before thinking the better of it. They finally settled on *Licensed to Ill*. Rubin wrangled with Columbia Records over two songs: "Scenario," a Schoolly D knockoff that got canned for the lyrics, "shot home-boy in the motherfucking face"; and a rapped remake of the Beatles song "I'm Down." The rejection of "I'm Down" was a bitter disappointment to Rubin, especially because the person who wouldn't give them the right to remake the song was another CBS artist, Michael Jackson. Despite the loss of the two songs Rubin was confident enough to give the Columbia executives a bit of quiet assurance: *This record will live up to anything you do for it.*

In November of 1986, *Licensed to Ill* fell into the hands of fans who had been collecting the Beastie Boys' singles since "Cooky Puss," and people who'd first seen them on *Krush Groove*; White kids who'd seen them open for an ill-fated early tour with Madonna and Black kids who'd caught them on tour with Run-DMC. The Beastie Boys' slow build made their first album one of the fastest-selling debuts in Columbia Records history.

Columbia rushed out a video for the song they believed had the most potential at radio and MTV, "Fight for Your Right to Party," a teenage rebellion song rapped over three power chords and a beat box. Rubin would have directed the video himself, but he was in the midst of preproduction for Run-DMC's movie, *Tougher Than Leather*. Rubin offered the job to his old friends from Weinstein, Adam Dubin and Ric Menello. With only days to prepare for a shoot over the Thanksgiving weekend, Dubin and Menello

concocted a story loosely based on the "wild" house party from the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, another bit of "high-low" art. By early December, the clip debuted on MTV, just in time for the Christmas buying season. The channel booked the Beastie Boys for their New Year's Ball.

The cover of *Licensed to Ill* depicted a plane crash. But by February of 1987, the Beastie Boys album had flown where no other rap artist had—to the number one spot on the Billboard album charts—and landed Def Jam's its first platinum album.

During the ascent of *Licensed to Ill*, Al Teller's phone rang. Not his regular phone, either, but the *executive* line, which ran solely between the offices of the top executives of CBS, bypassing their secretaries. The protocol for the executive line was strict. When it lit up, you answered simply by saying your name.

"Al Teller."

"Al, Larry Tisch," said the voice on the phone. The chairman of the entire CBS empire was calling.

"Yes, Larry, what can I do for you?" Teller responded.

"I just got off the phone with Bob Crandall, who is chairman of American Airlines, and he is livid," Tisch said. "He says that we just put out a record that shows an American Airlines airplane crashing into the side of a mountain."

The plane on the cover of *Licensed to Ill* had markings resembling an American Airlines plane. But not quite.

"Do you know that American Airlines is one of the biggest advertisers on CBS Television?" Tisch continued. "You have to take all these albums back from the stores and you have to change the cover immediately."

Teller paused. "Larry, I can't do that."

Now Tisch was yelling at him. "What do you mean, you can't do that?"

"Larry, if I call these guys up and said that they have to change our cover because American Airlines is unhappy with it, we will become the laughingstock of the music business. We will lose credibility, and it will cost us serious business. Artists will be reluctant to sign with us because of this interference by advertisers on a television network. I cannot do that. I will not do that."

Tisch called Teller "crazy" and hung up on him. Teller expected to be fired. He wasn't.

Still, there were some executive decisions that Teller wouldn't fight.

During a break in the recording of the Beastie Boys album, Rubin had traveled to Los Angeles to produce his first album with Slayer, *Reign in Blood*. Slayer incorporated occult imagery into their lyrics and packaging. In one song, "Angel of Death," lead singer Tom Araya took on the persona of the Nazi scientist and torturer Dr. Josef Mengele. Afraid of potential controversy, Teller's boss, Walter Yetnikoff, informed Rubin that Columbia would not be distributing Def Jam's Slayer album. He would be free, however, to shop it elsewhere.

Steve Ralbovsky took pity on Rubin, and introduced him to John Kalodner, an A&R man at David Geffen's boutique label with Warner Bros. Within weeks Rubin arranged for *Reign in Blood* to come out through Geffen Records. Now Def Jam effectively had two distributors, and Rubin had vindication. Critics were already counting *Reign in Blood* among the best metal albums of all time.

"Go around the block again," Rick Rubin ordered his driver.

Rubin was doing anything to postpone the inevitable. At some point, he would have to go to the set and direct the movie.

Shooting *Tougher Than Leather* was the most uncomfortable experience of Rubin's life. Directing a movie required him to wake at the hour when he usually went to sleep. When he got to the location, it was cold, with dozens of people standing around waiting for him to tell them what to do.

Half the time, Rubin didn't know what to say. After twelve hours on the set, he was too fried to plan the next day and didn't have enough time to sleep before some production assistant was knocking on his door again to take him back to hell. One morning Rubin told the PA to call Ric Menello to set up the first shot, closed the door, and went back to sleep.

"Fuck Rick!" Menello said when his cousin, the film's producer, Vincent Giordano, called. "I'm not directing this movie for him."

Menello, of course, didn't want the blame if the movie got fucked-up. And it was already fucked-up. When Giordano shot things without the reluctant director, Rubin would inevitably change them after he showed up. The production was behind schedule and bleeding tens of thousands of dollars daily. Since *Tougher Than Leather* was a completely independent affair for Simmons and Rubin, all the money was coming out of their pockets.

Menello noticed that Rubin wasn't directing the movie in the tone of the

script, either. The original concept was a comedy, but Rubin's direction was more dramatic, losing the irony and subtlety. Still Menello saw some good points. Rick Rubin and his dad, Mickey, portrayed racist father-and-son Italian gangsters, and Mickey was, in Menello's estimation, a pretty good actor. The whole racial revenge-fantasy thing was still there, too. In the last scene, Rubin's character, Vic Ferrante, prepared to kill Jam Master Jay. Then Run and DMC came in, guns drawn.

"I ain't walkin' outta here," Rubin said.

"Then you leave in a motherfucking casket," Run replied.

Rubin's character then sneered his final words before being shot, a line written by Menello:

"Never thought I'd die on account of a *nigger*."

The production limped along and wrapped up before the New Year. The footage sat unedited for months while Rubin went off to produce an album for the Cult—a rock band that wasn't even on Def Jam. Meanwhile, the brownstone at 298 Elizabeth Street was finally opened for the combined staff of Rush and Def Jam. Rubin moved into the loft above it, alone.

With rap airplay still a scarce commodity, Ann Carli and Barry Weiss of Jive Records decided to rent time on WHBI—starting a radio show called "Jive 105" to showcase their own records. Carli gave herself the sobriquet "Tokyo Rose" to host an on-air gossip segment.

The code name didn't matter; everyone knew who she was. Pretty soon, people were shouting "Tokyoski!" in clubs and asking for her autograph. LL Cool J grabbed Carli once as he made his way through a crowd.

"She's my fiancée, ladies," he said. "Back off!"

Carli started writing a rap gossip column for a small newsletter called the "Hip-Hop Hitlist." Published by three young men from New Jersey, Jae Burnett and brothers Vincent and Charles Carroll, the "Hitlist" laid claim to being the very first rap magazine, its publication supported by plentiful ads from record companies like Tommy Boy, Def Jam, Select, and, of course, Jive.

In 1986, Carli covered the proceedings at Tom Silverman's ever-growing New Music Seminar for the "Hip-Hop Hitlist." The seminar now included a Battle for World Supremacy, in which hip-hop DJs competed against one another in dexterous displays of turntable tricks. Most of the contestants hailed from New York, except for one underdog DJ from Philadelphia. He

looked strange to Carli, this geeky guy with horn-rimmed eyeglasses and a big head. Unfortunately, Carli had the misfortune to be seated next to the DJ's rowdy Philadelphia posse, which included a gangly, obnoxious kid who wouldn't stop yelling his DJ's name: "Jeff! Jeff!"

By the end of "Jazzy" Jeff Townes's winning set, Carli was screaming the DJ's name, too. She wrote about Jazzy Jeff's victory in the "Hip-Hop Hitlist" without knowing that the obnoxious kid next to her was Jeff's MC, "the Fresh Prince," nor that her partner Barry Weiss was currently tracking the sales of the pair's independently released single, "Girls Ain't Nothing but Trouble." Weiss was increasingly using this strategy to expand Jive's rap roster: Find singles on tiny labels already moving units, and buy them. In this way, Weiss picked up three Philadelphia acts—Schoolly D, Steady B, and DJ Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince.

At the duo's first meeting at Jive Records, Ann Carli introduced herself, but they already knew her as "Tokyo Rose." They recited, word for word, her column about Jeff's victory in the "Hip-Hop Hitlist."

"That was our first press!" Jeff's MC said.

"Tokyo Rose" had written about a rapper called "the Fresh Prince."

But in reality, Ann Carli had just launched the media career of Will Smith.

Rick Rubin, too, loved DJ Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince. "Girls Ain't Nothing but Trouble" was a perfect comic mix of virtuosity and violence. In the song, the Fresh Prince rejected the affections of a young lady. When she yelled "rape!" to avenge her hurt feelings, the rapper hit her with a trash can and "ran like hell."

Rubin, excited, called Simmons, wanting to sign them. Simmons told Rubin that the act wasn't "hip-hop" because the Fresh Prince was dissing himself instead of bragging.

"But that's what's so *great* about them!" Rubin explained.

Simmons insisted that the group would be an embarrassment, and Rubin lost the duo to Jive Records.

Rubin soon fell in love with another rapper brought to him via cassette on separate occasions by a few enthusiastic Def Jam/Rush artists.³ "Public

³Rick Rubin says that either DMC or Andre "Dr. Dre" Brown brought him the demo. Chuck D believes it was Jam Master Jay who carried it to Rubin.

Enemy #1" by MC Chuckie D was an old, much-loved promo on WBAA, rapped over an old James Brown break and recorded in low fidelity. It was, in Rick's superlative saying, "the worst shit." The song began with an insane, rambling guy introducing Chuck D with an almost stream-of-consciousness rant. Then Chuck D's booming voice—thundering like a Norse god descending from the heavens—answered: "WHAT GOES ON? WEEEEELLLLLLLLLL . . ."

After hearing "Public Enemy #1," Rubin got Chuck's home number, wrote it on a Post-it note, and called to tell the rapper that he wanted to make records with him. Chuck told Rubin that he had phoned a few years too late.

"I'm too old to rap," the twenty-six-year-old Chuck responded. "LL Cool J is sixteen."

The now twenty-three-year-old Rubin said he hoped that Chuck would reconsider, and that he would call him again sometime.

Rubin phoned him the very next day, and Chuck D declined again. So Rubin tacked the Post-it to the wall by his phone at 594 Broadway, and called Chuck D almost every day for the next six months.

Chuck D ducked Rubin's calls, instructing his mother to tell Rubin that he wasn't home. Chuck had his reasons. The slow death of his first single, an independent record called "Check out the Radio," coproduced by Spectrum City's Hank Boxley, left a bad taste in Chuck's mouth. You just couldn't make money making records. He was working for a photo service and thinking about a career in radio.

What rankled Rubin the most about not being able to sign Chuck D was that Rubin's own head of promotion, Bill Stephney, was the rapper's college buddy. Rubin decided to enlist Stephney's help.

"Get Chuck D to sign, or you're fired," Rubin said.

Luckily, Stephney understood Rubin's Bud Abbott routine.

"Rick," Stephney replied, "you want Chuck so bad? The guy put out a song called 'Check out the Radio,' and no one checked it out!"

Stephney pressed Def Jam's case with Chuck D. Rubin's persistence matched with Stephney's pledge to shepherd Chuck's project—to be his man on the inside—finally convinced Chuck to make Def Jam a proposition of his own.

First, Chuck wanted to be a part of a group that included Hank Boxley—now calling himself Hank "Shocklee"—as his silent studio coconspirator, and Rico Drayton, "MC DJ Flavor," as his vocal sidekick.

Second, Chuck wanted the music to have meaning. Stephney agreed; in

his final column for *College Music Journal*, Stephney envisioned a group that combined the beats of Run-DMC and the revolutionary politics of the English punk band the Clash. Now, with Chuck and Hank, Stephney found himself conspiring to do just that. Chuck, the former graphic design student, created a logo for the group: the silhouette of a b-boy in the crosshairs of a rifle. Beside the logo, in military-style stencil type, were the words "Public Enemy."

Stephney thought it was a real mistake to include Flavor. If Public Enemy was supposed to be this serious, political group what the hell were they going to do with a clown? Rubin wasn't sure about Flavor either, but he was willing to do almost anything to get Chuck D to sign. Russell Simmons, on the other hand, was no more impressed with Public Enemy than he had been with the Fresh Prince.

"That shit's nervous," Simmons said.

For all their shared tastes in rap, Simmons and Rubin were discovering that they had many dissimilarities. Simmons had embarked on a quest to re-create the "blue light R&B" that he grew up with in Queens, groups like Blue Magic and the Dramatics. But Rubin yawned at Simmons's pet R&B projects: Alyson Williams, Tashan, the Black Flames, and Oran "Juice" Jones. Likewise, Simmons didn't care for metal groups like Slayer. And he couldn't understand Rubin's enthusiasm for Chuck D.

But Simmons and Rubin found a way to pursue their divergent interests. They simply talked to each other less.