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FIVE YEARS AFTER HIS MURDER, WEST COAST RAP LEGEND **MAC DRE** IS STILL MAKING PEOPLE GO DUMB, WHILE INSPIRING OTHER ARTISTS TO SUCCEED INDEPENDENTLY.

WORDS **ANSLEM SAMUEL**

Dre's name rings bells on the West Coast, and rightfully so. Very few artists have accomplished what the rapper/producer has during the course of his career. Responsible for recording countless hit records, discovering new talent, ushering in a whole genre of rap and building a rap empire, he has amassed a cultlike following that has fans foaming at the mouth for anything he releases. While this might sound like the career path of Dr. Dre, it's actually that of another California legend, Andre "Mac Dre" Hicks.

Born July 5, 1970, in Oakland, California, Mac Dre burst onto the rap scene in 1989 with "2 Hard 4 the Fuckin' Radio," a brash street-oriented single that lived up to its title. Dre never abided by the mainstream's rules. He defied them every chance he got, and the Bay Area embraced him for it. Being sentenced to five years in prison for conspiracy to commit bank robbery, in 1992, only heightened his popularity. Dre recorded two albums (*Young Black Brotha: The Album* and *Back 'N Da Hood*), as well as cameo verses for other artists, over the phone while incarcerated. By the time he was released, in 1997, the Bay Area icon had a steadily growing fan base and an evolving sound, later dubbed "thizz." "When [Dre] first got into music, he was a stone-cold serious rapper," says Will Bronson, co-founder of SMC Recordings, which distributes Dre's label, Thizz Nation. "Then, when he got out of jail, slowly but surely his music started to change...He was doing the type of music that he [eventually] became popular for. 'Feelin' Myself,' 'Thizzle Dance' and 'Go Stupid' were out a long time before they became really popular. It took a minute for traditional Bay Area rap fans to really fuck with it. It didn't make sense to them [at first]."

Dre stayed focused and kept releasing material at a frantic pace. Over the next three years, he put out several albums, all of which sold well independently. Dre's buzz eventually blew so large that, in 2001, he founded Thizz Entertainment, a relaunch of his previous label, Romp Productions. As Dre's

popularity grew, so did his influence. From introducing the term thizz (a reference to ecstasy pills) into the hip-hop lexicon to creating his own thizzle dance, you couldn't claim to know the Bay Area without being familiar with who Mac Dre was. Often credited as the forefather of the hyphy movement, Mac created the soundtrack for a whole generation of rap fans.

More than just a talented musician, Dre was also a savvy businessman. In 2004, two months before Nelly dropped two albums on the same day (*Sweat and Suit*), Dre had already done it, with *Ronald Dregan: Dreganomics* and *The Genie of the Lamp*. Released independently, each album reportedly moved 30,000 copies in two week's time. Later that year, Dre, along with business partner Curtis "Kilo Curt" Nelson, launched Thizz Nation, a revolutionary distribution hub that provided Bay Area artists with the means to start their own labels and get their music out to the masses.

"Mac Dre's idea was to jump-start the Bay Area through himself, because he had a lot of fans' support. But the thing was, especially at the time, with Bay Area music, it was like an island. Everything that was going on, nobody [outside of the Bay] was aware of [it]," says Stretch, Dre's longtime friend and a Thizz Nation executive. "His idea was... 'Let's not worry about what radio's playin', let's not worry about what they're playin' in New York, let's not worry about what they're playin' in Atlanta, because we have to cater to our people first. So let's just...jump-start this thing with Thizz Nation and show the world.' It was a collected idea, but his vision."

Unfortunately, Dre would never see that vision come to full fruition. On the night of November 1, 2004, just a few months after launching Thizz Nation, Mac was killed in a drive-by shooting in Kansas City, Missouri, two days after performing there. Dre was on the way to his hotel when a car pulled up alongside the van he rode in and opened fire. Dre's driver swerved off the road, plunging into a ravine, which launched the West Coast

rap legend from the vehicle. He was later pronounced dead from a single gunshot wound to the back of the neck.

Mac Dre's death came as a huge shock to his friends, fans and fellow artists, and the impact of his loss is still felt today—even beyond the Bay. "[Dre] gave many artists opportunities," says Thizz-affiliated rapper Mistah F.A.B. "Not just myself or just in the Bay Area, [but] to the fans in Kansas City, who love him and still hang onto his every word today. Seattle and Portland. It wasn't just a Bay Area thing. It was much bigger than that... His impact will always be remembered, and it wasn't just for what he did musically. It was for what he did creatively and his entrepreneurship, his philanthropy, him being a great father, to being a great big brother, a great leader and a mentor."

Despite Dre's passing, his legacy lives on through the business model he helped set up for the Bay's independent market. With practically every artist in the region distributed or signed through Thizz, the label has put out more than 150 LPs, including a dozen-plus posthumous Mac Dre albums, since 2004. "Thizz Entertainment was like our Cash Money," says Bay Area rapper J. Stalin. Mac Dre is responsible for so many artists getting their first album out it's ridiculous. Them three to four years...where it was poppin', I think Mac Dre put out 50 artists. It's hard to do that independent, but he did it."

Still, Mac Dre's name doesn't usually get mentioned alongside those of entrepreneurial rappers like Eazy-E, Master P and Baby. "The reason why a lot of people don't and will never really understand [Dre's] impact is it's something you have to see and be around the people from the Area to know," says Stretch. "If you don't understand the history of it, you kinda wouldn't really feel it... At the same time, that will never change the effect he's had on not just the Bay Area or the West Coast, but a lot of stuff that he's done or tried to do has infiltrated hip-hop as a whole. And people just may not know where it came from." ♠