

Tupac Hits Radio For 48 Straight Hours

Written by Westside ID156

Wednesday, 06 October 2004 04:45 -

Trevor Simpson believes in hip-hop. Not the bland pop confection that KMEL trots out to sell pagers and Krugen auto parts, but the mixtapes sold from the trunk of an emcee's car, the spoken-word staccato and interlayered beats that defy commercial radio's bubblegum machine, the hope undaunted by life on Oakland's hard streets.

As a former intern at Clear Channel Communications, the radio behemoth that owns KMEL and Wild 94.9, the two Bay Area stations that dominate urban music, Simpson had seen the ideals that appealed to him sullied by safe programming, an obsession with demographics, and a ruthless determination to crush the competition. He wanted something more, a genuine connection to the music that defined his young life. When he heard that a new hip-hop station was rising in Oakland, one that promised to stay true to its community roots, he eagerly signed on as its new director of marketing and promotion. On April 15, Chicago-based Three Point Media took over an underperforming dance music station and reformatted it as Power 92.7, the "Beat of the Bay." The station debuted with 48 straight hours of Tupac Shakur and announced that from now on, Oakland would have its own hip-hop headquarters.

"We want everyone to know that we're right here in Oakland, and we're here for the hip-hop generation in the Bay Area," Simpson said a few weeks ago. "People know who we are; they're excited about the new station. They're glad that there's a station that's local and giving back to the community and actually is in Oakland, rather than being in a skyscraper in San Francisco."

Simpson wasn't the only one taking a chance on Power 92.7. Up to 25 kids signed on to work for Power's promotions team, seduced by the chance to be part of a new experiment in authentic hip-hop. But soon, their rival struck back. Shortly after Power went on the air, KMEL and its sister station Wild 94.9 dispatched black "street team" vans, packed with young, thuggish kids on promotions detail, in a campaign of intimidation, Simpson and other colleagues claimed. Clear Channel's shock troops allegedly sabotaged Power concerts and block parties, slapped KMEL and Wild 94.9 bumper stickers on Power street-team vans, threw fliers in the face of a Power employee, and even allegedly followed them home.

This just convinced Simpson and his colleagues they were on to something. They had no DJs, no sales staff, less than 1 percent of the audience, a weak broadcast signal, and no commercials beyond a few public service announcements, but they labored day and night to build Power 92.7 into a station that, as one employee put it, was "for Oakland, by Oakland." After a few months, the ratings finally started to grow. Finally, real hip-hop had a place on the dial. Local artists ignored by KMEL suddenly had a place to air their music. Hip-hop's political dimension no longer took second stage to booty girls and bling-bling. Power was primed, and its devotees were ready to take on the Man.

Last week, they found out who they were really up against.

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Simpson was only too happy to challenge KMEL, which to him and many others personified the corporate commercialism which had diluted hip-hop. The number two station in the Bay Area, according to Arbitron ratings, the 50,000-watt KMEL has dominated the Bay Area hip-hop scene since the mid-'80s, when it was spinning rap while most commercial jocks were still too scared to touch it, obliterating the competition with its mix shows, Summer Jams, and original programming such as Sway and Tech's *Wake Up Show*. KMEL established the template for urban music stations across the country, but somewhere along the way, hip-hop fans and local musicians claim, the station lost its heart and soul. Hip-hop activist and radio personality David "Davey D" Cook got the boot in 2002, and the station's historic commitment to programs such as the topical urban talk show *Street Soldiers*

began to wane. Local artists griped that KMEL, under the leadership of program director Michael Martin, had stopped playing their music in favor of a bland formula of market-tested hits. "Keak da Sneak, he got a hot single out now, and I don't really hear KMEL fucking with that," veteran East Bay rapper E-40 complained in a 2001 interview. "What we need to bring us back is radio support."

Many of these changes began after the station was bought by Clear Channel Communications, the media giant everyone loves to hate. Clear Channel is a vast, impersonal bogeyman, bloodlessly dictating the content of our culture according to profit margins, or so the story goes. Since assembling more than 1,200 radio stations after the 1996 Telecommunications Act made that possible, it has become a lumbering ogre, programming the airwaves from its distant executive suites, freezing out local artists, and accelerating radio's decline into the vast wasteland of safe, boring music. In many markets, its synergistic operations in billboards and concert promotion give the company a virtual monopoly on what kind of music gets out to the public.

Earlier this year, these complaints came to a boil on KMEL's airwaves, as incendiary East Bay hip-hop artist Paris sat for a January 21 interview with DJ Chuy Gomez. As Gomez paid homage to his guest's storied career, Paris hinted at how rarely music such as his gets on the station's airwaves. "I would love to have more love here, but it seems like people only really respect what they see on TV or what they hear on the radio," he said. "Most people's introduction to hip-hop comes from BET, or from KMEL."

One caller put it more bluntly, hammering KMEL for ignoring the so-called conscious rap scene. "I've been listening to KMEL my whole life, and I think that you-all can choose to play better music," she declared. "You-all can choose to introduce kids to Public Enemy. And you don't. And you say that the only way to make money is to sell gangsta rap, but if that were true, all the other types of music that's available, jazz and all this other stuff, it wouldn't sell. And it does."

"Well, there's something for everybody," Gomez retorted. "I mean, you know, I'm not making excuses, I'm saying we do play a lot of the stuff that we're talking about. ..."

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