

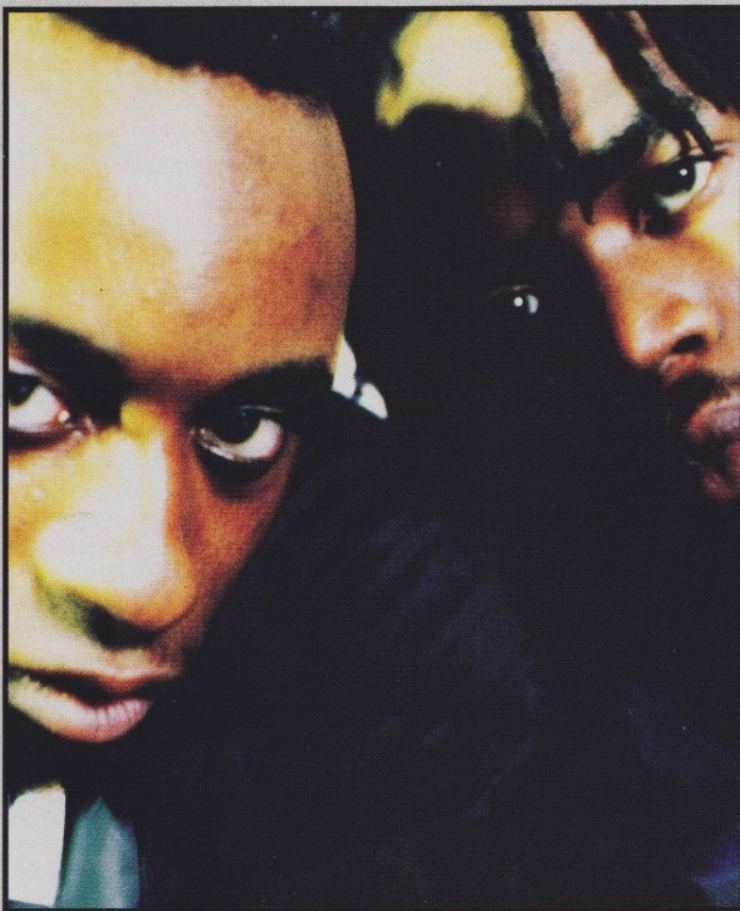
LIFE AFTER

After a three year hiatus, **KMD's** new album *Black Bastards* finds a hardened, reflective Zev Love X still struggling with his brother's untimely death.

Zev Love X seems to be in low spirits. Dressed in black like a mourner, he sits in the dimly-lit conference room, waving a blunt and clouding the air. The smoke makes it hard to see him. His homie sips from an almost-empty 40 of Olde E. It's one in the afternoon. His label's offices are in the Time-Warner building; a mortuary, really, for uncompromising ghetto music. The offices are filled with white employees, vampires, creeps and other assorted ghouls blasting the label's newest grunge band. It's difficult to feel comfortable sitting in the belly of the corporate hydra which both censors hip-hop records and pimps it in their "upscale" hip-hop magazine.

Zev seems to have more on his mind than self promotion. His brother Subroc, the other member of KMD (Kausing Much Damage), was killed by a car just as the group's new album was completed. His features seem hardened, his face not as innocent as it was a mere three years ago. Gone are the striped shirts and wire-frame glasses seen in ads for the group's debut *Mr. Hood*. Instead, Zev affects the paramilitary fashion of the incoming generation's disenfranchised street soldiers.

"I can't fuck with all that image shit, being under-somebody's-coattails bullshit," he says today, as if to disavow his past. His frown tells me he was unhappy with aspects of how all parties involved were handling his career. Elektra, he implies, under-promoted *Mr. Hood* to ghetto audiences and marketed the group as Native Tonguers, constructing an image around the song "Peachfuzz" as opposed to "Nitty Gritty," which truly represented the group's philosophies. "Peachfuzz" was a puppy-love



song; "Nitty Gritty" found them dissing all devils with their cohorts Brand Nubian.

"I feel a lot of things changed from our original idea as opposed to now, where we got to keep all the real shit," Zev says. "Our first time, we didn't even know how to fuck with it: shit fucking up, everybody getting in between this creative shit. . . ." With *Black Bastards*, he says the group stuck to their guns and produced the music they were making before they were discovered by MC Serch in Long Beach, Long Island. This time, no values were compromised.

Inspired by Last Poet Gylan Kain's raw Afrocentric spoken jazz (Kain's *Blue Guerilla* album), *Black Bastards* is an intelligent response to a society where death is usually random, senseless and violent. At times Zev is a centrist, wavering between life affirmation and out-and-out nihilism. One song talks about hitting people with wine bottles ("Sweet Premium"); another boasts of a new .380 ("Get U Now"); two vignettes analyze love-hate relationships with lousy women

("Plumskinz"); one finds him embroiled in the battle over the word "nigga" ("What A Niggy Know"); "Smoking That Shit" and "Contact Blitt" both espouse the virtues of being hip-hop potheads (the former featuring Kurious Jorge, Lord Sear and Earthquake); while the title track isolates MC Parker Lewis and whites who use words like mackadocious. The album is a more powerful, more relevant work-focused, sophisticated and streetwise—without the crossover friendly abstractions. Listeners are instead provided with a street level analysis of a society gone mad. The world has changed and, with it, KMD.

DEATH

BY RONIN RO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARL POSEY

LIFE AFTER DEATH

Zev exhales like a dragon, stoically answers questions, saying as little as possible, laughing to himself. He maintains a tight grip on his emotions.

"I wasn't even with him that day, but the shit was shady," he says of Subroc. "I don't know. I don't wanna get into details really." What he does say: on the fateful day, Zev was harassed by police officers in front of his home and taken into custody for an outstanding warrant from 1989. "For drinking a couple of beers, trying to take me in for some bullshit. So I'm locked up for four hours and didn't see him till the next day. I don't know. That's how it happened really."

"How did you find out?" I ask, recalling the November phone call I received about my brother Jay. "I felt it. I felt it definitely," he reflects. "I called my moms up right after that." I recognized his tone of voice—the numbness, the shock, the disbelief and ultimately, the acceptance that someone is gone forever. When my brother Jay's wife died of AIDS, leaving him with three children and a mind crammed with bittersweet memories, he began to drink heavily. His eyes were dull; he no longer gave a fuck about living. A year later, I stood by his closed casket. "Shit was real like that," Zev continues, oblivious to my thoughts. "I forgot who told me in words. I just knew."

Many KMD insiders insist that Zev is in a state of denial. "Zev used to be able to articulate his thoughts in such a clear way," one insider says. "But now he's sullen. Using beer and getting zooted as a crutch instead of facing things and trying to work it out."

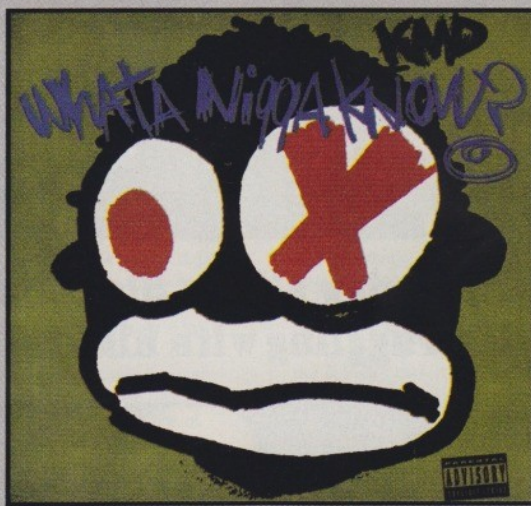
Death has cast a shadow on Zev, yet he pretends it hasn't. It has made him take a more realistic look at his life, the people in it and what he has to do with it. He realizes you only live once and have no time to please other people by being anyone other than yourself. This whole record shit he knows is temporary. At any minute, label executives can cut him off and send him back to relative obscurity (as they have done to so many others who have proved unprofitable).

"I don't know," Zev tells me. "Niggaz be passing away so much. The shit is crazy now. To tell you the truth, you just don't give a fuck no more. I mean, you give a fuck, you care about what goes on... but to a point where you now know that shit is real." It has always been real, I tell him.

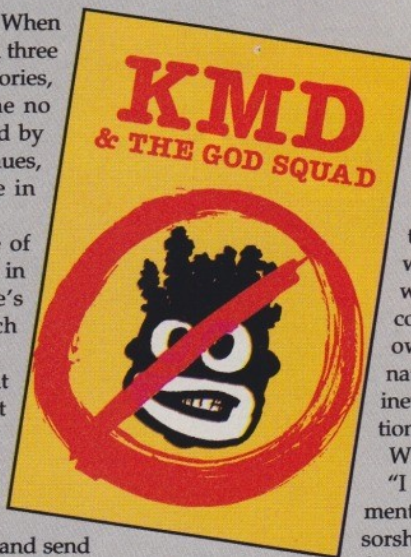
I ask if listening to, and having to promote the *Black Bastards* album is a bother, if hearing Subroc's voice doesn't reopen painful wounds. He leans forward in his seat. His voice grows a little more forceful. "It seems like I'm listening to two different people, to tell you the truth. I'm not even that motherfucker from before. I don't know. Different times. What I'm doing now, creatively, is totally different. It's like him-and-me-combined-as-one type shit." His voice is tense, his answers stiff. I ask if he's uncomfortable talking about this.

"Nah, I never did before," he deflects. "Does it sound like I'm stuttering or something? Ask me anything. I wanna talk."

When he listens to the music, he remembers "the exact time" Sub approached him with new lyrics, when Sub would barge in and say, "Yo check this shit, it's butter, bust it, I'm a flip it." His voice slides into what may be an accurate impersonation of Sub's enthusiastic tone. "When he was doing it for me," Zev monotones, his mind possibly filled with pictures of when they recorded home demos on a 4-track and an admittedly lousy Casio sampler. "I remember that shit just like yesterday," he continues, memories swimming through his eyes like fish. "It seems like one point in time, stuck there, can't change."



COON PERSECUTION: ZEV'S SAMBO FIGURE WAS SIMPLY BANNED LAST ALBUM (BELOW). THIS TIME, HE RETURNS LARGER, MORE OMINOUS AND WITH AN EYE JAMMIE.



Their mother is coping, Zev continues, nodding his head and considering her pain. "She went through crazy shit as well," he nods. "Word." There is a lull in the conversation, a prolonged silence speaking volumes. This is not the interview I want to be conducting. This is the last thing I need to be thinking about. Life is not going too hot these days.

"It's like this: the physical body is not us anyway," Zev continues, equating visiting a grave to "worshipping graven images." Subroc's presence is numinous, he tells me. "So the whole 'physical form' shit is mad wack." He pauses, toking on the blunt. He knows that Subroc will live on through the good deeds he did in life, through his music and in people's loving memories. But still the pain is deep. After a second, he stares into his lap, shakes a Newport out of his pack and says, "I feel like a fucking piece of bullshit." His face is a mask of torment. "Plus, smoking cigarettes? I know this ain't me. This can't be me for real."

"WHEN I'M GONE, EXPECT ME BACK TO HAUNT"

—Subroc, "It Sounded Like A Roc"

The death of a loved one brings unexpected emotions: guilt, anger, hate, sadness. Were we there when they needed us? Were we angry with the other when they died? Did we really treat them right? How could they leave us like this? While we question our own mortality we're forced to remember death is a natural part of life. Death is the one thing we *all* must inevitably face. Zev sits there, waiting for the next question. We shift gears.

Why *Black Bastards*?

"I did that on purpose," he says, "Bold title, bold statement. To make a mockery of this bullshit system of censorship." I ask about the song "Constipated Monkeys," about the sample from "Bellybutton Window," a posthumous Jimi Hendrix release. "Sub put that whole shit together," he says reverently. "That shit was flavor."

"What does the 'Garbage Day 3' instrumental represent?" I ask, admitting that it is my favorite track on the album.

"Whatever you hear or pick up out of that is mad short instances of big things," he answers. "That all just fills the whole gap of when people didn't see us or whatever." That explains the tenebrous bass, screams, racial epithets, gunshots and the lugubrious female voice that asks: "It's not the three of us anymore, is it?"

Zev says that the group KMD will endure "just as long as I can make records out this bitch" waving his hands at the corporate walls. His boy Grim Reaper, he foresees, will be joining. "Shit evolves like that, you know'm saying," he says, accepting that life is a procession and you're supposed to move on. "Grim and me collaborate on a lot of joints. We're about to come out with some shit in the summertime. But that's really it. I'm just getting with him. After that, there'll be no more changes."

For now, Zev Love X will be at home working on new material and being a father to his two-year-old son. The child, he tells me with a mischievous grin, who brings joy to his life. "He's two," he says with a nod. "Yep, bad just like me too. It's mad fun being a parent," he continues, his mind off of death and dying, and on life. "Like being little all over again, getting to bug out, play all day." It's good to know he has something to make him happy. Death, after all, shouldn't run our lives.

EDITORIAL

CORPORATE HYSTERIA

On the morning of Friday, April 8, Zev Love X of the rap group KMD was in good spirits. His new album, *Black Bastards*, was about to be released on Elektra, and as he headed to a scheduled meeting at his label's offices, he was confident it would do well. But by early afternoon, a great deal had changed. Bob Krasnow, chairman of Elektra Entertainment, informed Zev that morning that his record was being dropped from the label. The reason? The cover art, which depicted a Sambo character being hung in a noose, had generated enough "public outcry" that its release was permanently halted.

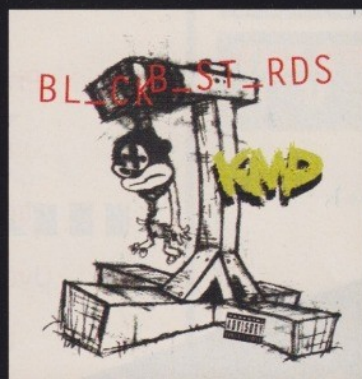
Zev had designed the image himself—just as he had designed the original Sambo image for his debut release three years ago. The thinking all along had been to "execute the stereotype" established by whites who dressed in blackface and lampooned Africans. "By me putting it out there, I'm really trying to provoke thought," Zev explained. "It's not the hanging of a person, it's an idea being executed—the whole concept and stereotype of our people being displayed as minstrels or servants or fools."

Terri Rossi, columnist and R&B chart manager at *Billboard*, had caught an early glance at the *Black Bastards* cover art, and she was somehow inspired to condemn the entire project in her "R&B Rhythms" column in *Monitor*. "I know the officers at Elektra and Time Warner are just kidding us," Rossi wrote. "To promote lynching is just plain evil. A holocaust is the same whether it is millions at a time or one at a time that ends up affecting millions. . . . Maybe [the brother] needs a refresher course on the entire civil rights movement. . . . Martin Luther King is spinning in his grave."

"If it was anybody being hung there, it was Al Jolson or Ted Danson, doing that stupid shit he did," countered Zev.

Clearly, the attack on the cover art seems flawed in the first place. But why couldn't Zev just alter the content slightly and move forward? It was just a sketch, it could be adjusted, right? Wrong. Though he offered to change the artwork, Zev and several disgruntled Elektra employees were informed that "the decision has already been made." Apparently, the album art was not the only issue in question. It was the mere idea of controversy that scared Elektra—and its corporate parent Time Warner—away from the project.

As we all know, Time Warner was subject to widespread criticism when the Ice T-Body Count song "Cop Killer" was challenged by a few prominent police associations. The bad press and the threats of a boycott scared TW executives and shareholders into eventually contradicting their initial First Amendment/free speech defense. Significantly, the KMD decision came a week before the annual Time Warner board



TOO CONTROVERSIAL? HARDLY.

of trustees meeting. The implication is clear: TW has issued a decree that all its subsidiaries—including the Warner-Elektra-Atlantic record family—must follow: stay away from controversy.

"The decision has been made that it was best that the record be taken in its intended form elsewhere," read Elektra's official statement. "We do not wish to tamper with KMD's statement by asking them to change it." This from the same company (WEA) that distributes Snoop, Dr. Dre and Tupac—but you don't see them censoring sure moneymakers like them.

"I think Elektra's decision to not put out this record out is saying basically, 'We are scared to put it out,'" said an agitated Dante Ross, A&R executive for the project. It sure sounds like fear to us. The KMD album is now a victim of corporate hysteria.

We had prepared a feature on KMD and a record review to run in this issue before we learned of the controversy. The album is fat as hell, with deep bass and deep lyrics, a step ahead of their first effort. We decided to pull the review (pending a new deal) but run Ronin Ro's story as is; the piece artfully captures the sense of impending doom that the corporate environment creates. The fact that this is a quality record that deserves to be heard makes this story even more relevant.

Rap music and corporate America share a peculiar relationship. Rappers like Snoop or Onyx achieve mindblowing, massive acclaim, sending their pure, uncut material through the vast channels of multi national corporations. But as we've seen over the years, it doesn't take much for the bottom-line bigwigs of big business to flip on hip-hop. It seems inevitable that the raw honesty of many rap records would offend enough of mainstream America to put the product at odds with the company selling it.

"So one person, her personal opinion speaks for the whole race and for my future as an artist and all that? That's nuts!" Zev was only a little vexed when he stopped by *THE SOURCE* the evening he had been dropped, since he seemed confident about getting a new deal. And Terri Rossi, contacted several days after Elektra's defensive maneuver, expressed regret that her actions led to this.

Yet the message this incident sends is clear. There is no more tolerance for "controversy" in the boardrooms of a media giant; rap is, quite simply, expendable. But what did you expect from corporate America?

JON SHECTER