

RA THE RUGGED MAN

(STILL CRAZY AFTER ALL THESE YEARS...)



This is the Suffolk County lowlife, the underground rap legend, the old school 516'er – a man known for driving spikes through the roofs of cars, attacking limousines, flailing on his audiences stripped to his underwear, getting banned from the building of his former label, and toting the occasional automatic weapon...

Meeting the infamous, untamed wild one known as RA the Rugged Man at his East Village studio at the ungodly hour of 11:30 a.m. is, needless to say, intimidating.

Due to release his debut solo full-length *Die Rugged Man, Die*, out on Nature Sounds on Election Day, Nov. 2, the Rugged Man is charting his comeback some 11 years after he first instigated a nine-label bidding war which had the then 19-year old, white-boy rapper with cool-loser rhymes from Long Island signing a six-figure contract with Jive Records, a deal that deteriorated into nothing but headaches and legal claims, largely after RA's outrageous behavior had, even by his own account, forced him out the door.

RA quickly found himself "dead-ass broke" for a good number of years in the mid-'90s, after post-Jive interest from Lyor Cohen, president of Def Jam at the time and now Warner Music Group's chairman and CEO of U.S. Recorded Music, proved fleeting.

While RA's MC rep continued to buoy him as an underground threat and garner him label-player references and compilation work, he watched as a second chance at major-label success melted away just three years ago, when an embezzlement scandal tripped up the expected 2000 release of his *American Lowlife* on Priority Records, subsequently folded into L.A.-based Capitol – an outfit that did not, RA says, "have 100-percent of my back." Neither Jive nor Priority returned requests for comments about the Rugged Man.

Although RA claims that Jive tried to blackball him unfairly – "They did a decent job," he insists – he raps on his *Die* debut about "being at peace with myself now," regarding missed opportunities. He documents his fall from big-labeldom in a relentlessly honest, comic set of rhymes set to luckless, haunted-house themes and cascading minor xylophone runs, over which he describes a time when he was practiced at arts of self-destruction.

While admitting in the aptly titled opening track, "Lessons," that he "wanted to die a few years back," and that he "was mentally ill," he now asserts that he's back on track. He sends up his history of misadventures in a hilarious track called "Superstar," a mini-movie about his rise and fall and the industry's schadenfreude obsession with it, complete with "NightTalk" call-in commentary about whether he's cool or a clown.

Sporting an unruly bed head, scraggly beard, long shorts and a dark tee, towering over me in his doorway, Rugged Man extends an enormous outstretched hand flexed open like a sideways ceiling fan. Amid walls lined with his

beloved splatter films, exploitation movies and critically acclaimed DVDs – "from Fellini to *Frogs*" as he's fond of saying, including *I Spit on Your Corpse* and *Black Sister's Revenge* – he recounts his unlikely tale of survival and determination to get back in the ring to regain his self-described title as illest rapper, sickest MC, king of the nasty underground.

So I put it to him: "RA, what's the lesson for the day, Rugged Man?"

Describing his Jive days – getting sued, blamed for instigating riots, hit with sexual harassment charges, and being signed to a label where "if I had to have a meeting with the marketing department, I had to go to lunch with them around the corner" – he says finally: "The shit was silly."

"Mentally-ill 18 and Mentally-ill 29 are two different stories. You get a little grip on life and you understand things a little bit better..."

While self-control was rarely an option he reached for back in those days – and he admits his antics were "fuckin' crazy" and alienating – RA contends his low-brow attempts at humor and self-parody were more often than not taken out of context by a corporate culture easily rubbed the wrong way

"Like I'd stick a mannequin finger in my pants and people'd go flippin' out in the fuckin' office – like 'Oh, he's crazy, I'm scared to be in the elevator with him.' It's like, 'Fuck you.'"

Jive fed his growing frustration, he said, signing the Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears, which seemed to confirm the label's inability or unwillingness to fully promote and harness his schizoid energy. In their rush to seek the mainstream, he felt left in the lurch.

Survival in the post-Jive years involved RA getting by mostly on independent compilations, 12-inch vinyl, some guest tracking, and the few cuts the labels let trickle out, like "Break Down the Walls" – an intro theme for pro wrestler Chris Jericho on Priority's 2003 *WWF Aggression* album.

The rest was hobo moxie. RA said he picked up a bit of the squatting habit – a hoboing survival mechanism – he learned from his dad, a Vietnam vet who once commandeered a cousin's foreclosed-on house by moving the family in and simply refusing to leave. The bank finally paid *him* a couple thousand to vacate after 16 rent-free months. "We grew up every-

where in Suffolk County," laughs RA, recalling his dad's freeloading days.

The difference between the Rugged Man now, RA says, and the Rugged Man of before, is that although he's "still just as fucked up and sick in the head as ever," he "can control shit now," and thus is not the raving loon he used to be.

"Mentally-ill 18 and mentally-ill 29 are two different stories," he explains. "You get a little grip on life and you understand things a little bit better. Maybe I'll flip a chair over, but I'm gonna keep my cool in front of motherfuckers most days.

"Back then, if you was crazy it was cool," he adds. "All these rappers talkin' mentally ill, mentally ill. It's 'Hey yo, you got a rapper here that really is! It's me.'"

RA speaks of an all-time low that eventually helped him to gain some perspective, stemming from a harrowing incident in which federal agents surrounded the house where he was living with his father around 1996, about a year and a half after the Jive deal imploded. It was around this time that he says he began to lose his grip on reality.

While he won't elaborate on the particulars of the raid, which he references in "Superstar," he says the events described "were not fiction." He remembers having no idea who his friends were. "It was more than just depression, this is where you can't determine what's real, what's not, who the fuck is against you or what's goin' on. Like everything's in a fucked up delusional blur," he recalls.

He's not looked back since, other than using the experience to cull rhymes for *Die*, a title that seems to mock detractors who might have wished his indefatigable spirit squashed.

After all this, RA wants neither fame nor infamy, but simply the respect and freedom to produce art he's always insisted stands on its own. The generous deal he's struck with the independent Nature Sounds is certainly a start. A one-off with a 50-50 split of the profits, RA will own his masters in five years.

As it stands now, he reasons he'll make more money on the underground than the majors would invest in him. Meanwhile, add movies and publishing to the agenda: RA is finishing a book on boxing, and is set to "supposedly" begin work on a horror movie with *Fangoria* magazine. Plans call for RA to write the script, and Frank Henenlotter – of *Basket Case*, *Frankenhooker* and *Brain Damage* fame – to direct.

By Shane Kite.
Photo courtesy of Nature Sounds.