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# Stranded On Death Row:

with 2Pac, Dr. Dre, and Snoop Dogg

**By Tommy D.** (with Ben Leinen)

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*I moved to Los Angeles in 1986 to NOT be in the music business. I ended up working for some of the biggest artists in music and one of the biggest labels in rap history, Death Row Records!!! If everyone would have listened to what the Geto Boys said, maybe it wouldn't have turned out like it did: "Everybody know New York is where it began/So let the ego-shit end."*

Chapter 1: To Live & Die In L.A.

### **1996, Can-am Studios in Los Angeles: aka "The Prison"**

I'll never forget my first session with 2Pac, Johnny J, & the Outlawz.

Recording at Death Row was usually an all-day party, listening to the songs over and over again, smoking weed, drinking 40's, and eating Taco Bell. That's how Snoop Dogg, Tha Dogg Pound, and DJ Quik did it. I didn't realize 2Pac's recording process was quite different. I was about to find out.

As I was engineering in the front studio, Johnny J, a producer who frequently collaborated with 2Pac, was running the session. I figured it was good time to take a break after we dropped the beat. I went to the kitchen to make a phone call.

Next thing I know, Heron, head of Death Row Security, walked through the door.

"Hey, you better get in there man. 2Pac is pissed," Heron said. I didn't think anything of it at the time. Then he shouted, "Tommy D, get your fuckin' ass in there right now!"

I started making my way back. When I reached the studio, there was 2Pac... standing in the doorway. He threw his book of lyrics down.

"You motherfucker. What the fuck you doin'!?! I had my shit ready to go! I don't even want to rap to this beat no more! You ever leave the studio again, I'll kick your motherfuckin' ass," said 2Pac.

I'd only been gone for a couple minutes. I wanted to say something but I let it go. It was better to keep my mouth shut.

2Pac left his book on the ground and made Johnny J load up another beat. "I don't even

want to hear that beat I'm so pissed. Gimme another beat. I wanna kick that fuckin' engineer's ass," Pac said.

It was a tense session after that. The Outlawz were standing behind me the whole time. They would have kicked my ass had Pac given them the order. Worse yet, I saw them swipe a couple of razor blades sitting on a tape machine when they walked in the studio. (Razor blades were used by engineers for cutting tape.) That was their only weapon of choice to protect 2Pac since they couldn't get guns past Death Row Security.

The whole session I was thinking, *I'd rather be in the back studio with Snoop for the Playstation Madden tournament.*

Johnny J did me a favor three hours into the session and said, "Hey Pac, Tommy D needs to take a shit!" That broke the ice.

I was scheduled back for the 10 AM to 6 PM slot. 2Pac walked in wearing a bulletproof vest with actor Tim Roth and some suits from the movie company. Lance, my assistant, told me we were doing voiceovers for *Gridlock'd*.

2Pac sat behind me. I looked back at him. He kept winking and smiling at me? This was going on for an hour as he was puffing his cigar.

Pac asked me, "Hey, I bet you're glad this isn't a 2Pac session, aren't you?"

"Man, this shit is boring. I'd rather be doing a record than doing this shit," I said.

Pac lit up like a slot machine and said, "From now on, you're my engineer! What's your name?" Pac asked.

"Tommy D."

The Outlawz rolled up to the studio with him later that night. They were surprised to see Pac and I were joking and having a good time like nothing happened the night before. We knocked out nearly five tunes that night. Pac left in a great mood.

2Pac and I would collaborate hundreds of times after this encounter. It led to me being Chief Engineer for his final album...

## **1986-1992, Cedar Rapids, IA - Los Angeles, CA**

This book isn't intended to be an autobiography. But to establish how I ended up working with the biggest names in rap, here's my story:

I'm straight outta Cedar Rapids, IA, born and raised. I graduated from the University of Iowa. I received degrees in Finance and Marketing with a minor in Music. After graduation, I moved to Boston to form a punk rock band with my brother Pat. It all began when I got the call.

"Start practicing, because we are doing some shows. The gig is in a month," Pat said.

We named our group Vasco Da Gama after a Portuguese explorer who was famous for discovering the Cape of Good Hope, but really he was a pioneer of slavery. Vasco Da Gama's run in Boston came to a close when our record deal went sour. We were being shopped by the same lawyer that got Grandmaster Flash a deal. I figured it was time to pack up and go back home. The music industry wasn't treating me well.

I moved back to Cedar Rapids. I decided to pack up my stuff and head to L.A. I was sick of the freezing Iowa weather and wanted to go to the ocean to hang out. I heard LA was happening.

I went to Los Angeles to not be in the music business. All I had was \$250 in my pocket, a bass guitar, and some clothes. Doug, a friend of mine from high school, rode with me.

Doug's pops ended up renting us a hotel room after having some bad luck with apartments. Doug's father was fairly well off. He got us a room on Martel Street right behind this tuxedo center when he saw how we were living. It was right across the street from Guitar Center on Sunset Blvd.

Now we had a place. The next thing we needed were gigs to make money. We saw a "Position Open" sign as we walked by the tuxedo rental store. Doug walked in and out a few minutes later to say, "Dude, I'm hired! I start tomorrow."

There were a lot of perks about Doug's new job. He rented out suits to stars whom would go to some of the hottest parties in Hollywood. We used to take suits from the store and crash these extravagant parties. The Boyz from Iowa. We've got no money but we've got

tuxedos! Doug was a natural at socializing. Nobody had a clue we were uninvited guests. We blended right in like regular wedding crashers.

I had several jobs all at once: restaurants, hotels, and at a phone company. I pretty much dropped the idea of working in the music business until I went to the USC Symphony. They were playing a piece composed by my brother, Michael Daugherty. He invited Michael Boddicker, who was also from Cedar Rapids, to the performance. Boddicker was one of the most established synthesizer session players in Los Angeles. He was a consistent choice for Michael Jackson.

Boddicker asked me what I was up to in Los Angeles. I told him I worked for a phone company.

He said to me, “Why don’t you come work for me?”

I said, “I don’t know anything about synthesizers?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll teach you everything you need to know.”

I thought, *Why not do it?* Six months after arriving in L.A., I finally landed my first real job at SST.

Synthesizers Systems Technologies (SST) was operated by Ed Winquist. They were one of the top rental companies. Artists would rent equipment from SST for a variety of functions: studio recording, live performance, and stage-work.

The first day, Boddicker brought me into a room with a hundred synthesizers wired together.

“The manuals are over there. If you can’t figure something out ask Ed. If he doesn’t know, ask Don. If Don doesn’t know, call Robbie Buchanan. And if Robbie doesn’t know, then I guess you call me,” he said.

My job was to set up synthesizer for some of the top studios of the day. I learned every keyboard and became a walking manual. I was on call 24 hours. It got to the point where I would be up all night at SST making music.

After four years of grinding at SST, I went into the shop one day and was shocked when Ed Winquist told me, “Guess what? Your days are done here.”

I thought I did something wrong. I asked, “What do you mean?”

“Prince wants to hire you.”

Ed explained that I had to take a test session before being offered the job.

“You’re not working here anymore because Prince wants to hire you. If it doesn’t work out, you can always come back,” Ed reassured.

To learn more, go to <http://gofundme.com/2pacbook> to donate to Tommy D’s project.

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