

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

You're doing something. I think it said close to a million dollars a day in drug sales.

Is that true?

I think it said two.

It was a two million a day?

Yeah, I think it said two.

I feel like I can rule the world. I know I could be what I want to.

I put my all in it like no days off on a road. Let's travel never looking back.

All right, man. We're live on the pod today. We have Michael Harris.

But do you like to go by Hario or Michael? What do you like to go by?

People call me, you know, people that know me by Hario call me Harry, call me Oh, or Michael, whatever works.

So I'll kind of set this up. But basically, I've read a lot about you.

And I've read about a lot of the work that you've done.

The way that we got connected was we have a mutual friend named Chris who has this thing called the last mile, which helps people when they get out of prison, helps them get jobs at tech companies. And he's been bragging about you because I told him you can't see it now.

Because I redecorate it. But on my wall, I used to have a picture of Tupac and Dre and EZE because I loved NWA and I love like the rebellious culture of people who created cool stuff.

And he goes, Hey, you know, I know the guy who is part, you know, part brains behind all that.

And I go, What? And he said who you, you know, he said your name. I go, Oh, I've read all about him. And he goes, Well, he's my he's my buddy. That's kind of how that's kind of how we got connected. And so I thought today we can kind of talk a little bit about your story.

So people can learn about you. But then also we can talk a little bit about business and kind of the stuff that you went through. So where are you from? Los Angeles. I'm from the east side of Los Angeles. You told me by age 26, you had 11 different businesses. He said around that in your early or mid 20s, you were producing Broadway shows that you were like in the mix at a very early, early age. How did that kind of come to be? And what were those 11 businesses?

Well, I used to own a limousine. First business I had was a limousine service that was quite profitable. And I also had a construction company. I had production companies. I had music companies.

I had salons like beauty salons. I had real estate investment companies. So I was just kind of like all over the place. And I also produced not just concerts and plays, but also I supported clubs in the city. How big was the limo business? I had about 30 cars. And so at the time it was pretty impressive. The style of car that we had. What type of monthly revenue kind of limo business make? Man, it depends. I stayed pretty booked. I spent a lot of time advertising. So a lot of times I would have beyond the cars that I possessed, I would have people calling me and saw a lot of the services that surrounded me didn't have business. And so I would form them. I would form out the rest of the business that I didn't have the capacity to serve. So a lot of times I would provide opportunities for the other car services that didn't advertise as much as I did. So maybe somebody needed 100 cars and only had 30. I could provide them with 100 because I would parlay it out to what they call form out to the other companies, which you get 50% of the service that is conducted. Like an affiliate. Right. Right. But you actually get half. You get half of what it is because you're the one who initiated the sale.

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

How old were you? And how old were you when you had a limo company that had 30 cars? I probably maybe 23 years old. How on earth does that happen? What age did you start working? When I was a kid, I mean like until my like before I even went to junior high school, I worked at a shoe shine parlor and that that shoe shine parlor, it was in my neighborhood, but it was two shoe shine parlors. It was one on one end of the corner and one was on the other end of the corner. What I was able to learn from that experience as a 12, 13 year old kid is competition and how business was ran. And these two guys competed with each other, but they also hired, you know, kids from the neighborhood to work at these shoe shine parlors and we competed with each other. And so I used to listen a lot, you know, a lot of people come in different from different walks of life. It could be preachers and business owners, people from the street. And you would just, you know, while you're shining their shoes, you're listening at a young age hearing about different opportunities and how people approach business differently. And so I was always like a sponge at a young age, but you know, friends, and I also learned how never to judge a book by its cover. Like sometimes a guy might pull up and be in a nice car and and you're like, people is, you know, trying to get that customer. And this guy comes in, may only have one or two pair of shoes and may not even be a tipper. But then a guy pulls up in a station wagon or a regular car and he might have 30 cars and, you know, 30 shoes in there. And also it's a big tipper. So it's just, just learning how to read people and, you know, just that whole competitive thing that was amongst us as you used to compete and, you know, be at our best, be dressed, you know, represent and, you know, honing it on our skill. So. All right, let me take a quick ad break because I got to tell you about some podcasts that I think you might like. The Gold Digger podcast by Jenna Kutcher. It is brought to you by the HubSpot Podcast Network, which is your audio destination if you're a business professional. Now Gold Digger is a podcast that helps you discover your dream career, gives you productivity tips, social strategies, business hacks, inspirational stories, and so much more. So there's a couple different episodes that you might like. One is she got laid off and launched an innovative virtual assistant company. So Jenna talks to Bobby about how she launched a virtual assistance-based business and the challenges that she had, you know, launching it, knowing how to give up control, why a VA can be totally game-changing for a business and how getting started as a VA is as easy as applying online. So go ahead, check out Gold Digger. You can listen to it wherever you get your podcasts. All right, everyone. Today's episode is brought to you by Marketing Against the Grain. If you want to know what's happening in marketing, then this is the podcast for you. The hosts are Kit Bodner, who's HubSpot's CMO, and Kieran Flanagan, who's HubSpot's SVP of Marketing. On the pod, they share their unfiltered marketing expertise. One of my favorite recent episodes was called Why Creators Are Disrupting Marketing. Kip and Kieran talked to Steph Smith, who's been on My First Million a Ton, about all things creator economy. They asked her how you could find a niche audience, how to create great content for them, and how to monetize that content. And if you know Steph Smith, you know there's no one better at that type of stuff. So if you love marketing, you want to know what's happening at the cutting edge of the world of marketing, go listen to Marketing Against the Grain wherever you get your podcast. I try to learn some from everything I always did as a kid. Like how do I use this moving forward?

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

You know, what is it? What's the lesson learned here? You know, so that was that was in my mother also on a restaurant in the neighborhood. And I watched how she navigated that and how she would, how she handled her customers and how she worked with her staff. And, you know, I actually remember

before she bought that business when she used to work for the people that she bought it from, how she, you know, raised up, rose up in that in terms of management and then acquired that business. And so just watching people be effective in business at a young age had a profound effect on me. And you end up kind of getting in trouble, which I'll let you tell a story in your 20s.

But before that, how, how big was your empire in terms of employees at its peak?

I probably had about 150 employees. And can you reveal like how much revenue like this whole, the whole empire was bringing in? I was making millions of dollars. I mean,

35, 36 years ago. So I don't remember exactly. I mean, that builds up though. What do you, what did you do with your money? I always invested in real estate.

In real estate? And so you're not not public equities. You liked real estate in your, so you're buying real estate in what your neighborhood?

Yeah, well, yeah, all over in where I could find a deal. No, it's about, you know, like rehab properties as well as no luxury of properties in business, unless I would purchase it.

How many did you own? How many, how many buildings?

Probably 30 or 40 buildings.

Damn, you still own them?

Yeah, I own what I own. It's been a long time, brother.

I mean, that adds up, that adds up. I just started purchasing some stuff, you know, but the thing that you're most famous for is the entertainment stuff.

What led you to entertainment? Was it the plays at first?

No, one of, one of my first, well, I said limousine was one of my first major business, but I opened up a studio and we created a company. I believe it was called the Jingle Factory. And what I would do is make commercials for local businesses and so with the local radio stations and so like KJLH and KACE and so that brought me around musicians. So, you know, I would have people sing hooks and make certain melodies for it to go with, you know, certain businesses that give it a certain aesthetic. And so a lot of producers and singers would come into the studio and I kind of just kind of drifted off into that world.

So I'm managing groups and working with different record labels and production companies.

And at the same time as my limousine girl was growing, I worked with a lot of production companies as well and artists would use my services. So just being in that circle connected me to that world.

Was there anyone that I would know of that you started working with like really early on around that time? Was it called the Jingle Factory? Yeah, the Jingle Factory was non-celebrity. That was just commercial. But at the same time, I started working with Motown. I started working with at the time Motown was pretty hot in the city. So I was working with Motown behind the scenes a lot. And then how did that kind of go into the production companies?

Well, I created a production called Why Not Production. And I just felt like during that time, it was hard for people that looked like me to really get a strong hold in the city. So

I decided to create my own production company. So and I would, you know, be available to help produce artists that didn't have the financial well thought to be able to do it themselves.

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

And somebody brought me a play opportunity. And I never was involved in plays until that moment. And I just thought it was just a real creative space for people who were, you know, in the movie business, but didn't have work at the time, but could hone in on a craft and also provide entertainment in the community. A lot of people may not have been used to experiencing the plays. And so that gave me an opportunity to bring that kind of entertainment to my community. So it was very exciting. I got to meet some pretty heavy hitters.

Like who?

I met Denzel doing that opportunity. I met Paul Winfield. I met Vanessa Williams.

I met Richard Lawson. I met Ruby D. I mean, Al Freeman. I mean, I could just go on a list.

It was a number of people who work with me on this production.

And Ron Milner was the author of this particular play called Checkmate.

And I was able to take it to various cities. And ultimately got it to Broadway with the Nederlanders on 46 and Broadway. And my life came crashing down right before we actually launched on Broadway. We was on Broadway, but I didn't get to market and promote it the way I normally do. And so what does that mean? You basically, you know, someone came to you and they go, Hey, man, I got this idea for this play. I got, here's my vision. Yada, yada, yada. Here's what I think could be the outcome. And you're like, All right, cool. I'll put up 100K. I'm half owner and I'll help make connections. You're going to do a lot of the day to day work. I'll oversee and I'll make some connections. And or were you more hands on? Like, what's that look like? Okay, like when you talk about like, when I was telling you about, I would like to come into the management aspect of it. What that does though, helps me understand the business.

Okay. So part of that, that, that, that relationship, that merging of that relationship, you need to teach me everything you know about what you do. And then I, you know, compile that with my management skills and then we can, you know, move on to the next level. But that was part of what I would do. And by the way, at this point, you're still in your 20s.

Yeah. And you were working with some up and coming people, but you're definitely probably working with some established people. What did they think about this guy? They say this, I mean, you got this tough guy persona now, I bet you had that same persona back then, you know, you could be in, you can be intimidating. I imagine they're like, I don't know about those tough guys. Well, I'm saying that's my opinion. And so if you're in your 20s and like, this young black guy talking about living in LA now is wanting to be out here in New York, putting on these plays. Like, who is this guy thinking is? Like, did you deal with a bunch of that? I always respect other people's territory, you know, no matter what business you're in. And I always deal with people respectfully, you know, I mean, that maybe it's the persona and the perception of me, and then it's the reality of me. And so the reality is that I always was straight up, you know, so there may be that tension, there may be that consideration before they get to know me, but then once they get to know me, oh, this guy's, you know, 100, you know, keep it real, you know, probably later on when the death row stuff happened, I just think people conflate everybody's attitude as one. And, you know, we all were different, you know, we all came from different vantage points to help create that entity.

So you said the play didn't work out because your life came crashing down. What's that mean?

I mean, the play worked out when we first got involved in that business. It did really, really well. I mean, I was in, you know, Westwood Playhouse. I was in the

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

Gullitory Square in Frisco. I was in the Washington Center in D.C. But what happened was right when we went through the Pre-Broadway and got ready, you know, open full scale, I was arrested and sent to prison. What were the charges?

I was arrested for one, for attempted murder, and two, later for drug conspiracy. And the later, the drug, the attempted murder was, I was exonerated at the end after 30, after 23 years. But, you know, I knew I was innocent. And I think that made me take it, you know, lightly. And I didn't really, I kept working while I was out on bail, not thinking that this would, results that happened would happen. I thought I was, you know, I would be vindicated. And life was upside down.

What, were you guilty of the drug charges?

Yeah, I used to be involved in drugs. Even though I had got out of the drug business, you know, you get pulled back in based on some previous phone calls. I had got out. But still, you know, that's, they call that karma, you know, you have to pay the piper.

And when I, when you Google your name, one of the first thing comes up, it's this interview you did, you did. But the article said at one point, you're doing something, I think it said close to a million dollars a day in drug sales. Is that true?

I think it said two.

It was a two million a day?

Yeah, I think it said two. I'm not proud of that.

So.

What's the story of that?

It was hard work. I mean, you know, I mean, the thing is.

And that's coke, I guess?

Yes, it was cocaine. Yeah. And I think that like I was saying before, wherever I put myself to a better indifference, it was, it was like, I put myself to it, you know, and then it was like, only after watching the repercussions throughout my community and communities across the country that I realized that, you know, what was making me rich was also making me poor in spirit and in culture, you know, I was helping to destroy my own community. So I don't really take a lot of joy in talking about the amount of money I made in that business, even though I was engaged and I was, I was pretty focused in that business when I was young and misguided in that business venture.

And I bet that's confusing because whenever, you know, I start something and it starts working out, working out, I get, it's like a dopamine rush, you know, just seeing the sales come in.

I mean, it's exciting, you know, like it's fun. In your case, it's even though people were getting hurt, it's definitely exhilarating and it is exciting. And even if you're using the money to invest in cool stuff that helps your community, it's still exhilarating, adventurous life.

And you gotta understand some at a young age, you know, just, you gotta, you gotta, see, it's gotta put everything in this proper context. You know, like I'm growing up, people selling weed, you know, it's no, it's no harm, you know, it's like, and then this thing is introduced to the community and, and it's just the next level from selling marijuana or whatever it is.

And you, next thing you know, you're involved in all you see is the dollars, you know, what you're making, the transactions, you know, because everybody was, you know, you smoke weed next day, you get up, you go to work, you do what you do. You had no previous insight on what this could,

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

could become. And then when you see later on, when you see that this is not like marijuana, this is something else, and it's changing the makeup of the community, you know, people just not themselves no more. And now it's like, whoa, you know, especially if you're a conscious person and you was raising a good, you know, family setting and now you're hustling and you hustling in a way that other people that have become vulnerable to this particular drug, which I never used. So I didn't know, I didn't know what it felt like, but I'm, you know, people that I cared about later, I would see them fall victim to it. And, you know, that's that karma I'm talking about, it comes back to you, you know, it's like, wow, this is what I'm doing. And so yeah, I made a lot of money. It was exciting. It was adventurous. It was, it was an enterprising. But then it also had that side that you, you can't ignore. And then you got, what was your sentence for 33 years? And that was mostly the attempted murder or the, no, that's, that's, there was not my sentence. I had a 25 a life. And on top of that, I had a 20 years sentence for the federal with the feds. Damn. What's that feel like here in that? It's unbelievable. But, but it's real. I mean, like they, the criminal system is real. I mean, it's, it's like a lot of people, I think conversations like the one we have, it should be had more. I think people just see the glitz and glamour of a particular lifestyle. And, and the fact that a lot of us have very little patience because some of us live in conditions that are unbearable. And so you just want to get out, however you got to get out. And so you don't realize that the patience that, that you need, that you can exercise, that you should exercise could save you a lifetime of misery. So you started death row while in prison after you went in? Yes. How on earth does that work? Well, you know, I'm, I'm, I'm enterprising. What do you want me to tell you? I mean, what do you want me to say? Well, what's it? I mean, when you're just sitting there, you have a visitor or you're writing letters, you're doing phone calls and someone comes to you and be like, Hey man, you want to start a record label? I mean, I don't even know. I mean, how long were you in, in there before you, you kind of got this idea or how that happened? Well, I got told I was involved in different aspects of the entertainment business already. So it's kind of like, I was already bitten by the bug. What happened was, I don't know if I should tell you this part of maybe you should wait till the movie come out, but maybe you already heard some aspects of this. I just still had all this energy inside of me that I wanted to do something I didn't want. I didn't want my sentence to be the end of me. And I just, I just couldn't stop. You know, I'm a kind of guy that only slept three hours a day. And like I said, we're in 11 businesses. How do you go to prison and sit there and be okay with that? You know, it's just not what it is. So you always, you're trying to find something outside of your environment that allows you to stay alive in spite of your circumstances and spite of your sentence that has been imposed. You just, you know, you're still youthful and you still, you still want to have an impact because like I say, when you deal with the totality of a person and you see that there was more good than bad in that person, that's what you're trying to get back to. You know what I'm saying? Like, like sometimes I could say just trying to find a cool place in hell, you know, for all the bad things that I did, you know, praying that God could, you know, forgive me for that. And at the same time, being able to give something back to my community that they can use instead of something they shouldn't use. So what's that creation story look like? I told you, I read Ruthless. Is that what the book is called Ruthless? Is that by Jerry Heller? So I have that. Yeah. So Ruthless was before Defro, right? Right. Right. Right. Right. So

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

Defro is the, if you say if you will, the next iteration of Ruthless, because one of the main components of Ruthless was Dr. Dre. And Dr. Dre was the producer of the music that the, that mostly

was produced by NWA. Mostly all the music that was released at NWA was produced by Dr. Dre. And so NWA was a group and Dr. Dre was a part of that. But he also was the engine that made it run.

But I don't think that EZE, Rest in Peace and Jerry Heller also deceased understood what understood Dre's value to the point where it shouldn't have been overlooked. And so that opened up an opportunity for him to be disgruntled and for sure night, who, who actually began to manage Dr. Dre after managing an artist by the name of DOC, who introduced should to Dr. Dre. And I was introduced to should shortly after. And that's how that relationship came. He was managing Dr. Dre and DOC. And we created a company. First we created a Godfather Entertainment and

then out of that birthed a Defro. Who came up with that name? I came up with Godfather Entertainment.

And, and based on my situation, you know, I was actually housed on Defro. And St. Quentin? Yeah, St. Quentin. I wasn't sentenced to Defro. I was housed there for a short period of time. And I was able to witness young people younger than myself at the time being sentenced to Defro. And I just, I was profoundly affected by that. And I thought that though. So you hear different versions of the name because they used to be deaf, deaf like D E F row. And then we decided to call it Defro, which that's the company I set up. Defro Records. And you guys, I mean, you didn't necessarily, you didn't even shape the genre. You created it a little bit. You know, you had Poc, Snoop. Who else was on there? I mean, it's, it's the people don't realize Defro didn't have a large roster just had an effective one. And also my ex-wife Lydia, she was also a part of the management team that helped facilitate the company in the beginning. So that's your question. It's like the moment the world heard Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre's voice together, it was, it was a game changer. And that relationship, it's just made magic. But there was other members, other producers and other artists that was on the label, female, like Rage and Jewel, Dog Pound. There was just a lot of synergy there, you know, and they all come from different walks of life. And it just was that time, you know, some things was just time, you know, the energy pot came later. But he brought some of that fire with him too. And it just put Defro in history books like no other label, because a lot of people don't really understand that Defro was the little choo-choo train that would, you know, it just, it connected dots to so many different companies that a lot of people don't even realize. Like what? I mean, from universal to to increasing their distribution because of the relationship with Defro and Interscope. And Warner Brothers are almost getting out of the music business because the way they mishandled their relationship with Defro and Interscope, I'm just saying it's, it's so many different aspects to Defro's existence that most people don't even ponder they're too busy with the negative side of in the drama that some of the people that was involved participated in, but they don't think about the enterprising nature of that organization, which is what my focus is. It's like, what was this original intent? And what did it do in the business world that most people don't talk about? Hopefully I'll be able to expand that, you know, being a Snoop Dogg or working together. Snoop Dogg, we acquired Defro and

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

we're partners and I'm the CEO of the new Defro that I helped create 37 years ago. So it's exciting to see how that turned out. What's crazy is you've been around all these people and you actually saw them when they were young. You talked about all these interesting people, Denzel, Dre, Snoop. What does some of these young guys have in common, you think they kind of, because they're not just like successful business people, they're culture changing people, they changed America, they changed the world. People that aren't just successful. I hang out with a lot of successful people who are just like rich and they create businesses, but they're not changing culture. They're rich and that's cool. You know, it's cool to meet someone worth \$300 billion or \$300 million. That's awesome. But they're not like inspiring young people to think a different way or they're not getting banned by the police for saying whatever they're saying. I mean, like you were around people that changed culture. What attributes did some of those people have in common? And when you meet one of these young guys and you're like, oh, you have it, you're going somewhere. You know what I'm saying? Well, it's just back up, like seeing Denzel as the young Denzel and seeing him now, he still is consistent in his character, you know, in certain roles he won't play. And it's the way that he approaches the craft that attracted me to that project checkmate in the first place. He was, he was just always a constant professional, you know, it's just, he didn't really hang out, you know, he just did what he did and he took off. But I just watched him and I watched his work ethic and in his projection and the films that he do for people that look like myself, we're proud, you know, he makes you proud. He makes you proud. And that's not enough of that in our culture to have people who can represent, you know, just in this craft, you know, just a strong, focused, intriguing individual, you know, instead of, like you used the word intimidating, like towards me earlier, you know, it's like sometimes that could be off-putting for people and it kills opportunity because people see the book. Remember, earlier I talked about judging a book by its cover and not really taking the time, you know, to connect to that individual. But Denzel has been really great with that, with the roles that he's played. So it's my honor and pleasure that they had known him in and to know him now that he's, he's a constant professional even today. He's always, you know, thinking about his thoughts when he does a particular project. And NWA and Defro is different. And by the way, when I said intimidating, in part, I meant, I'm intimidated because you've got this cool demeanor. I asked you earlier, I said, if you ever say something that you don't want in the pod, just let me know. And you said, I don't say things I don't mean to say. Like you're just, you got this Clint Eastwood, just like, I'm like, I just, you've got this coolness about you that is, is intimidating is what I meant. And I'm intimidated by your success. Well, I appreciate the clarification. Yeah. Because, you know, I'm glad you said that. No, and I appreciate that aspect of it. I just think about my thoughts. And so that's why I'm usually conscious. And if I say it, I meant to say it. That's what I mean. You're very intentional. And I, because when I get nervous, when there, if there's silence or I'm nervous, I'll say shit that I don't even mean to say, you know what I mean? And you don't, you don't seem to have that attribute. No, I'm being in some pretty sticky situation. And you got to say what you mean, mean what you say. It could turn out real ugly, you know, if you don't understand your surroundings and, you know, you got to speak to your audience, you know, whatever that audience may be in real life. I mean,

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

in life, you know, every day or just, I'm thinking about setting up me a podcast, you know, so you talk about your success. I'm trying, I'm being your rear view mirror for a second. Then I'll be, I have a feeling you're going to only be in the rear view mirror for a second. But what were you saying about, I think you said NW, I forget who you said you're talking about. You already said they were, they were different in a way that they provided an opportunity for us to speak. Now, some people don't like what we said, but it was different, you know, it was like, you had a certain box that, you know, back Americans and not just back American Hispanics, you know, different nationalities that are sometimes regulated to a, you know, a box. And so you don't really get to hear them. But through this mechanism called music, called hip hop, called rap, called, some people call it a gangster rap, you know, I just call it a reality rap, you know, whatever that reality was in us community, being able to speak to it, you know what I'm saying? Like becoming your own CNN or Fox News, you know, you can say this is what's happening, good, bad or indifference, but this is what's happening in our community. And they were able to communicate that. And so my intentions was to elevate, but at the same time, this thing takes on a life of its own. And so then it becomes a business. And then you have executives and producers who start to see your world even different from how you see it. So later it was altered, but in the beginning, it was fresh and raw and uncut, you know, so people were getting mirroring into a community they knew a little about. And so in that aspect, the rappers, the music business was able to shed a light on those communities in a way that hasn't been shed. And especially when it came to police brutality, you know, a lot of the injustice that was taking place in those communities, it just, it just became a profitable vehicle that allowed us to talk about things in code or in, you know, do lyrics that normally you wouldn't even have access at doing. So what's the first song that you heard that you thought, oh, death row, this I'm onto something. Well, it's, it's, it's like, I got to hear a lot of it before it came out. So it wasn't, I mean, I got to hear the whole album, the chronic before it came out. But the first, when I heard the first song that was done on Deep Cover soundtrack, the single that Snoop and Drake did, and I was in prison and a lot of guys was, ah, they weren't really paying attention to them. Really? To that happen yet because it was NWA and other groups that was out at the time. And so MCA, all these guys that were out, you know, and then we had other local artists, Tati T and Miss Max of Spain and Ice T and all these different guys were, you know, they sold career as well. But once they heard that song on the radio, one ASAP on the undercover cop, and they heard that melodic sound come from Snoop and those thumping beats from Drake, it was game over. It was game over, you know, and that was like, wow, you know, and just to see them become top notch in a game because we took it from an independent type of setting with Rufus and NWA and Defro was able to submerge itself into the majors and become a major player, which changed the game for a lot of rappers that are quite successful today. So the chronic came out in 92. What year did you go away? I went away in 88. Okay, so you're in there for four years by the time the chronic comes out. How much is a cassette back then, you think CDs in the late 90s were like \$18. What's it, you know, 18 to \$23. So you're talking about \$9 for a cassette, something like that. So I didn't, I didn't realize how fast this happened. So I just, I'm looking at the, I'm looking at Death Row's work. So the first album was the chronic that sold like 3 million pretty quickly. Then it was doggy style with Snoop. That sold

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

close to 7 million, like pretty fast. Then it's All Eyes On Me by Pac, Tupac, and then another Tupac one. I mean, I didn't realize how fast you came out the gate. And then we did, we did soundtracks too. That was, that was above the rim. We did, we did a couple of soundtracks that blew up

as well. So if, if, if a cassette tape, if a cassette's about 10 bucks, you're talking about 60 million, let's say you sell, you sold about 6 million cassettes in the first three years of business, just that alone, that gross revenue, we're talking, you know, 50, 60, 70 million dollars in the first two, three, four years of business. Right. That's crazy, right? That's crazy. It changed the game. It changed the game. It made people go crazy too. So, you know, like money just make you a bigger where you are. So, you know, it's like a lot of, a lot of things changed, you know, but it was, you know, even today, when I think about it, it happened quick, you know, just a, you know, and no one person is responsible for it. It was just a combination of dots being connected. So you're, you're on 10, on a \$10 cassette tape, how much does death row get? Like 30 or 40% three or \$4 on \$10? Yeah, that's about, that's about right, man. It's not bad. Damn, man. So, I mean, what's it feel like to be in prison and seeing all that money come in and you're not able to enjoy it? I've been better if I was on the streets. I'd tell you that. But at the same time, it was good to see legal activity taking place to make that kind of money. I come from a world where some people, not that you had to, but we felt that we had to do what we had to do to get what we had to get and to be able to see a legitimate venture do so well. And, and those opportunities become available to me and so many other people. That's what I kind of locked into. Like we can go legit, you know, and basically they, they figured out creative ways to tell stories that could capture the masses. Even now, when I, when I'm around Snoop or Dr. Dre and being in this home studio and watching him and his team, you know, conduct full orchestras, it's like what happened here, you know, like, and they still are coming with music and they're still working with young people and they're still open. It's like, it's no like, I hear no, I'm done. I hear none of that. It's just like every day and just to be in those environments and, and just, you know, being recognized by those individuals as somebody that had an integral part in what they did. And me and Snoop is more than most pretty connected when it comes to that. You guys took off right out the gate with that throw, but it almost seemed like, unfortunately, you kind of went away as fast as you came. I mean, your work stayed forever, but the entity kind of went south after only like a handful of years or, you know. Well, it's back to management again, you know, what would you have done differently managing? And was sugar, was sugar good manager? Well, I just say this about sugar, you know, I think she was really creative and he was in the right place at the right time. And, and he was able to connect the right people. And so in the beginning, it should, to me, could have been one of our biggest entrepreneurs. Had he not imploded, you know, I know him, you know, man, I used to sit with him and I used to talk with him. So I know the side of sugar that most people don't know. And we've considered ourselves brothers at one time, you know, it was a close bond and to see him unravel and to pull away from these opportunities that was surrounding him. It's just a tragedy, you know, because I know a different should, but yeah, it went away for a little while, but it's back, right? It's back and it's strong and people are looking at it different. And so I have nothing negative to say about anybody because I just think that's wasted energy. At my last, I started my last company when I was about 25 years old and we grew, we had dozens of

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

employees and the average age at one point was like 23, 24, 25. And I was the adult in the room. I don't drink, I don't party, I don't do any drugs. I'm completely sober, but a lot of my people would and it was a creative business. And whenever they would start drinking and stuff, I would always have to put someone in charge and I'd be like, Hey, I got to get out of here. I don't want to be around this. And like managing young people, particularly in a party environment and particularly creatives, that's a challenge. You have to like give them the lanes to stay within and let them be free within those lanes. And from an outside perspective, you dealt with that times 10, you know, they weren't just drinking and, you know, making bad decisions at the bar.

There was some, some, some worse stuff that was happening and all those guys had issues.

What's that like managing creative wild wild guys?

Well, you know, it's called putting out the fires and music or any creative. I just think that you have to take people where they are, you know. And so what happens is, if you take away, if you take away something, it takes away something. And so we all get to elevate in life. And so who you were and what you came from in the condition that the way you were conditioned to see the world, all of that had something to do with the way that music was made. And so I'm not justifying behavior of any kind. I'm just saying that you start where you start. And if you look at what you're talking about, about some of the conduct that different individuals participated in early on, and you look at them now, you know, these guys are philanthropists. They, they, they have charities, they have foundations, they, they change, they help and motivate and mentor other people in their careers. So yeah, yeah, that for all was all of that. And that's what made it exciting. And that was the energy that it possessed. But it grew. And some people learn and some people didn't. And some people went up and some people went down.

And it's just, it's, you know, you talk about a Shakespeare in play. I mean, there is no other, you know, it's just, you know, a lot of people lost their lives and careers and, and a lot of people became quite wealthy as well. So it's just a combination of it all, you know, so the story is still being told. Do you think that that creating death row is, is that the thing you're most proud of career wise? Well, my career is not over, sir. And so so far. So far. I just think that it's the most impactful. Good bad. Like I said, good bad. It's, I can go somewhere and, you know, people from all over the world recognize the brand. And you'll be surprised people from high up in different parts of this society, classes, society has told me that when they were in college or whatever they were doing, that that music. Did I listen to it all? I know every word to California love to hit them up. I mean, I know all these words. I, I grew up in Missouri as a you know, as a 12 year old white kid of Missouri. I don't relate. I mean, I don't experience what they experienced, but like there was a rebellious side of me where I go, I want to stick it to the man. I want to, I like what I loved about Park in particular. Here's one of my heroes. I love that he accomplished so much. What held was I think he died in September of what, 96? He, he, he was, he was 25. He was a young guy and he had, he had an artful side to him. You know, these old interviews when he's 18, 19, when he's talking about, I think Jada Smith and talking about like, you see the love that he has for this woman. He's being artful and he's talking about like, Brenda had a baby. These songs are like real issues, but then he also got, he got charged with rape and he also was, you know, the whole hit him up thing and with, with all these other guys, he was fighting. And what I love about him is that he was a flawed character who was mostly good

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

and he redeemed himself like he would screw up and then he was a, he was a rich character and I was drawn to that. I'm like, I got flaws. You know, I had substance abuse issues and I overcame them and I did all this stuff. And I was drawn by people who screwed up and overcame and then maybe screwed up again and overcame and had this rebellious bold part of it. And that's why I was drawn to it, even though I can't relate anything to selling drugs or to any of that.

But even some of those charges like, you know, with Tupac, we're not here to defend or revisit the case, but we know that a lot of times you have to guard the people that surround you as, as much as you guard the food that you digest. And sometimes you could be a big, big name person and other people around you could do something that you get it because you're the, you're the easy victim, you know, you don't want with the big paycheck or you don't want with the big name. And sometimes you, you suffer the consequences of the people that you allow in your circle. So it's important to always be conscious of that. And like you said, we're all flawed. And, and so it's just we're human beings. And then when you go back and you look at the age, and if you look at somebody that's 25 years aged now, and you be like, wow, this kid accomplished this much. And he was able to have this type of mindset and was able to be able to translate that into the music. I mean, come on. I mean, this is just, it was something else. And he was prolific. He had all those albums at such a young age. He was prolific. So I identified with those characters, even though

on paper there wasn't a lot that I could relate to, but I identify with their, maybe not identified, but I admired them. I was like, dude, guys at young age is changing cultures. And that's, that's interesting. It's funny you saying that because my thing is, I think it's infectious.

I think the sound, the energy was infectious. So you didn't have to actually come from that particular culture to really identify. It just, it, it met you where you was. It provides you with some energy that helped you do whatever you were trying to do. It was, I think it's more about the energy that it possessed. You know who Gary V is, Gary Vaynerchuk. He's, you know, I watch him

sometimes to get amped when I'm having a bad day. And then, but when I was younger, it was, I would

listen to hit them up or something. It's like, you know what I'm saying? Like it gave me, it gave me fuel to get back on track. And so I thought it, I mean, I just love that stuff. I also,

that's why I like startups. I like people who are just nerds playing on the computer and they, they create Bitcoin or, you know what I'm saying? Like they create something that sticks it to the man. And even though they're just, you know, in Silicon Valley, in an office, whereas you guys were down there and right in music, it's like, it's still kind of a rebellious energy of us versus the world that I think is infectious. I think there's quite relatable. The, a lot of the internet tech entrepreneurs, that whole creating something out of nothing, I think it's relatable for people in the hip hop business. So it's quite interesting to see how it all falls out. You know, a lot of big companies have been displaced because of the internet and don't know how to find a place

and it allows for new merging, creative minds to take its place. So I'm excited about what the future holds. I remember when I'm seeing Dre sell beats and I was like, damn, this guy pulled it off. Like he just sold the company for whatever, billion plus to Apple. That's crazy. It's so cool. I don't think it was close to three billion. Billions. Yeah. It's just so cool to see someone

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

who's an outsider kick ass at another person's game and get accepted a little bit. You know what I mean? And I think that that is where a lot of admiration comes from, where it's an outsider who played by his rules, did it their way and it worked. And now the mainstream wants it. And I find that to be very admirable and inspiring. And that's why I'm inspired by you, particularly when you're talking about when you got on me for saying intimidating, you're like, no, no, no, I look at the whole person and I'm like, I think that that's awesome. I admire that. It makes me happy to hear that. And it makes me feel good seeing the underdogs succeed and not just succeed, but kick ass. And that's why that's why I admire you is because you screwed up. Sometimes you kicked ass other times, but at the end you won. And I think that that's cool. Yeah. I mean, you know, it's hard. Like, you know, you know, you reflect back to your youth and where you are now and, you know, what

you learned. But at the same time, it's hard for me. Like, it's hard for me because I'm still, you know, like, I'm only two years out. And so excited about so much, you know, just to be home, to be, you know, be an example of what can be right. You know what I'm saying? You know that there's other people like me that went away, that made mistakes, that deserve to be free.

The resources that we leave behind bars are tremendous.

How'd that experience shape you being in there for so long for 33 years?

Oh, it shapes you. It shapes you, especially when you don't know when you're going to come home. You know, it's like, how do you maintain your sanity under those circumstances? What do you do? What do you read? What do you, how do you engage on a day that basically keeps your mind active and alive? It was hard, but I did it. You know what I'm saying? What did you read?

I like to read autobiographies. Well, they say you're the average of the five people you hang out with most. And I think that could be true. But when you're in the situation you're in, or if you're living in nowhere, you know, Missouri or whatever where I was, reading biographies, it's like, I would read so many of them, I would read one or two a week, I felt I was the average of the five people I read about. You know what I mean? Like it rubs off on you.

Yeah, you become a part of it. It becomes a part of you.

You normalize success or normalize their behavior.

And that's why you succeed for yourself.

Well, yeah, I mean, hopefully I'll be, you know, as important as you are one day. I heard a story. I heard a story that you got picked up when you got out in a Rolls Royce or something like that. Yes, yes. I guess that's a good, a good way to get welcomed home.

Well, I mean, it's relative, you know, it was beautiful. Just, they could have picked me up in a, in a Toyota Corolla. You know, I've been happy to get away from that place.

But it was just to be able to drive down the coast and all my sister and friend of mine who's been really close to me for so many years, they picked me up and we was driving down the coast. And I remember saying I was about half an hour, like having a strange feeling like I couldn't believe that I had been going that many years.

It didn't feel like it is what I'm saying. It was like just walking out of there, putting on some clothes, driving down, just being in the moment. It was like, I just went to the store or something.

I will wrap up here in a second. But the way we started talking was you wanted to do a podcast. You think you're going to do it? Yeah, I think this is a year to do it.

[Transcript] My First Million / The Unusual Story Of Death Row Records Co-Founder Michael Harris

I think it's a year to do it. Good podcast. It's either like you got good delivery, meaning you're like really funny or you're like a comedian or something like that. Or it's like highly produced. Like it's almost like you hire all these celebrities and they have a really good fictional podcast where they're telling a good story. Or you have like an interesting perspective. And that's the hardest one to get because you have to go and live life and then you just have to tell those stories. That's the one I think you have, which is really interesting. I think that a lot of entrepreneurs like myself, I'm real emotional. You're into the arts and building businesses is my art. And people who are sometimes artistic, I go up and down. I get real sad sometimes.

I get real happy. I'm not calm like you are all the time. I'm trying to work on my calmness just to be a little more steady. You experienced a lot harder stuff than I have and you have remained. You have this cool attitude. I said it's like Clint Eastwood. And so I think you kind of inspired me to be calmer. I also think last night the Grammys were on and I think it was, they did like the 50 years of hip hop and the ghetto boys were on singing one of their songs. And they had this one line where they go, real gangsters don't flex nuts because they know they got them. And that's kind of how I feel about you. When you're the guy, you don't got to say you're the guy. Yeah, you are who you are. And trust me, when you're in situations like I've been in, you're going to rise to the top or you're going to fall to the bottom. It was weird being there and being away. And like I said, especially early on, it was really dangerous. But I come from a certain type of community and I conducted myself a certain kind of way and I was able to get through it without a scar. So I didn't see it go from where you Katie, you don't know if you're going to live the next day to a man. It's got to get prepared for the outside world. So I'm glad Chris introduced us. Last mile is a very progressive program that's teach people how to code while they are in and also prepare them for job opportunities when they get out in the tech world. Well, man, I appreciate you doing this. This is awesome. Thank you. I really look up to you. Thanks for doing that. Appreciate you. Thank you for the opportunity.