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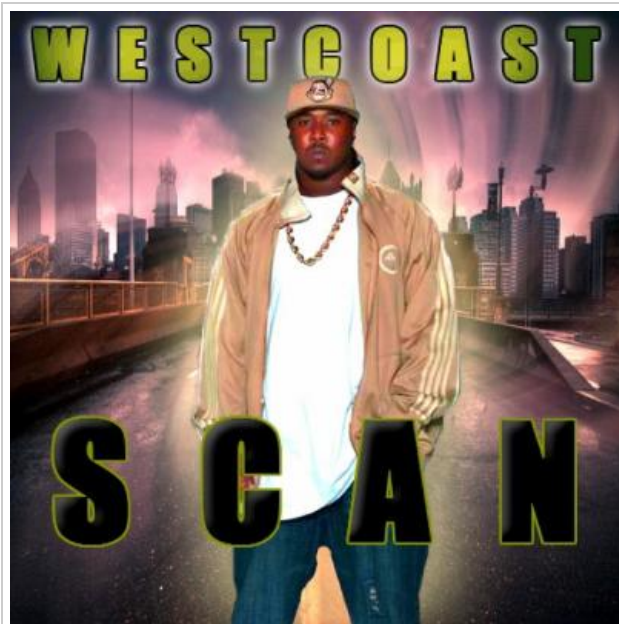


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From the Streets to the Driver's Seat!

The Inspirational True Story of Westsider Youngsters who Changed Their Lives Through Sheer Will!

By Adrienne Papp | February 23, 2011



Scan of Ground Up Ent. by Don Johnson

Setting an example by aiming for a worthy cause while coming from nothing and having no support at all almost never happens.

This is the kind of story you do not see in the press. True stories in which we see the lives of underprivileged kids and young adults coming from a rough, dead-end neighborhood leading to the dangerous streets of Los Angeles, pursuing a gang-oriented life of crime, drugs and violence, mainly due to no choice, - miraculously turn around as if the finger of God played a role! Who would have the iron will and determination to break out of such backgrounds where they either fall victims to, or become predators of a crime. The vast majority of those hardcore urban stories end up this way, pretty much swept under the carpet, but Donald and Dion Johnson instinctively knew despite of having been immersed in that lifestyle that they had to go in a different direction, make something of themselves, and eventually made decisions that have set them on a path to success. Their story is also a very humane one that sets a heart-warming example and encourages others to take the message of these talented and beautiful people to heart and change their lives.

Donald and Dion Johnson were born into a tough life, the kind you frequently see profiled in documentaries about the troubled inner cities in this country. Their father ran the streets in Compton, Philadelphia, but also all over in California, doing whatever he had to to make money for the family. When their mother got tired of the lifestyle, she took the boys and moved to New York where she landed with a government job. But, when the two boys didn't do well in their new environment, they found their way back to California on their own which greatly saddened their mother. "My Grandmother and Mother were a huge influence in my life," say Johnson. "Without them things could have gone a lot differently. My brother and I spent a little bit of time randomly in foster homes, but it was still my Mother who had the most stable influence on us."

The boys managed to survive the gritty neighborhood in Los Angeles, got through

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the boys managed to survive the gritty neighborhood in Los Angeles, got through school and both enlisted in the US Navy and despite all difficulties Donald also managed to graduate from gang infested Compton Dominguez High School. The US Navy however was an opportunity to escape the tough street life and see the world, in their case, aboard the USS Ronald Reagan. It was also an opportunity to develop a sense of discipline and some core military values, something both boys did so well that they were featured in a Navy video about the brothers shaking off a tough life, and making a real contribution to the US Navy. Donald Johnson was even honored with a "Sailor of the Quarter" award on his ship, something he was very proud of and teased brother Dion about!

Although Don Johnson enjoyed his life aboard the USS Reagan, his heart was set in music, and during return trips to California, and even while he was deployed, Don was always on the look for new music and acts that he could use to launch a management and record company. "I used the name Ground Up Entertainment for my "baby" because I started from ground level and now we're moving up, step by step but very steadily" Johnson says. "We really started from nothing and I intend to make a lot out of it. That's what Ground Up is all about."

As the story goes it reminds me of the great movie 8 Mile starring World Famous, Eminem. That was a movie none of us will ever forget. While talking to Don, who could easily pass for a Calvin Kline model, and looking into his warm, clear eyes, I am thinking, if all kids could do what he did, life would be different.

Almost magically Don met a young successful sax player, named Eric Darius, whose profound influence on Johnson undoubtedly set him in the right direction, including the discovery of jazz when Darius opened for Jazz Legend, Najee, at the En Canto Street Festival in San Diego. Don started to appreciate the diversity of music, captivated by the talent of Eric, and the calling was too strong to deny. "When Eric started playing that's where I heard jazz, which I used to think was old people's music," he says, "and now I am hearing this fascinating sax player, Eric Darius live, and he just amazed me. He played for about twenty minutes and basically just shut down the main performer, Najee at the concert. Najee was great, but that night belonged to Eric. I went up to him and introduced myself and told him that wherever he was performing in California, I would be there to see him play." This one courageous move led to other favorable events and Don Johnson soon found himself fully immersed in his dream and actively pursuing it. He became friends with Eric and they enjoy drinks and dinner when possible.

Donald's first major revelation nevertheless came when he was attending a video shoot in Los Angeles, and an artist called Scan got up to rap and his performance just killed the room. "There was something about Scan that clearly stood out, miles above everyone else who I was working with before," Johnson says. "It was his presence that interested me, the way he presented the material, and there was also something very different about his words. These were personal lyrics, something you had to pay attention to."

From the time Don met Scan he felt that this one act was all he needed. "His rapping really opened up his personal life. You don't really see much of that, you usually get a bunch of superficial lyrics about money and ladies and having a good time. Scan was different."

Don began recording Scan with the help of his business partner Chris "Bounce" Davis, and put out an album's worth of material entitled "The Passion", which they hoped would capture the appeal of Scan's music. The CD sold well, despite the lack of major label promotion and distribution, but through local venues, performances and clubs. The CD also bonded the partners even more when Chris Davis deployed to Iraq in 2006 not only to serve his country in the highest respect, but he also was sending money back home to Johnson to fund Scan's album. Not many young and ambitious soldiers have this kind of commitment and determination to literally create something out of nothing but talent and conviction.

"Scan even performed one of his singles entitled Victory at Delta Chi fraternity at USC, for a really different audience, a bunch of well-to-do white kids, who had never had the street experience we had," Don says. "And that show went incredibly well. We had our followers there too but Scan just killed it with those frat guys and everybody got along. That really proved to me that this music could cross over."

Another attention catcher about Don that you notice immediately is that he has the most sophisticated and polite, soft-spoken mannerism I have ever seen in a young man. How is it really possible to come from such a difficult background, yet be so intelligent and polished? It is called drive, ambition, determination and intelligence!

With some momentum now building quite quickly Scan and Don have since moved onto the fifth recording and second album, a CD that should drop sometime this summer. As it turns out, Scan was a high school classmate with one of the most successful rap producers in LA, Ricky 'Ric Rude' Lewis, who had developed an enviable track record beginning in 2002. Rude first broke in with a featured track on Busta Rhymes' "It Ain't Safe No More" release, and also worked with Ray J, Fantasia's "Free Yourself" album and Destiny's Child, including their smash "Cater 2 U," which Rude co-produced with Rodney Jenkins.

"What I like about Scan is that he creates hard core, uncompromised rap, very

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different from the lighter, more commercial hip hop or pop that you usually hear," Rude explains. "He also writes lyrics with very clever word play, and it's very personal. Whatever he's going through in his life at the time, you can hear it in his music. When I heard these songs, it sounded very familiar, like something I've probably been through."

Rude has taken on the project with Johnson as a labor of love, without the compensation a successful producer would normally be entitled to. "I got involved because I had a relationship with Scan," Rude says. "We got to know each other better when we got out of high school, and I'm working with him because I really believe in his talents, and I want to make music that will change the landscape in terms of the current scene. This is very real music, very true to life."

Before the actual recording process, Don Johnson and Scan spent many hours talking about the concept of the album. "We've done a lot of pre-planning for this CD," Johnson says. "We spend a lot of time talking about it, trying to come up with out-of-the-box concepts, and I think you'll hear a lot of different ideas, creative concepts, good storytelling, a lot of different sounds, some things people might not have heard before in this recording. It will be a very musical album. It will give you something to think about and you can also dance to it. This CD is going to be a classic."

And that's just part of the activity Don Johnson has scheduled for himself and his Ground Up label for 2011. Donald will be getting out of the Navy in April, and from there he's committed full steam in getting his company to be a strong player and new voice in the local music industry. He has plans to work with sax master Eric Darius, an R&B artist named Le Marvin, who is part of Ground Up's immediate family, and who already has a great deal of experience with major labels and songs including "Thug Like Me and Patrons." Don also has plans for a unique talent, a singer named Stephanie Mills, who has been singing for almost 30 years. "It is our goal with Bounce to be able to sign her and make her as successful as possible. Stephanie Mills is one of the greatest singers who has never gotten her due respect and we want to create the recognition for her we know she deserves. She still sings the house down to this day."

Don Johnson has a clear thinking and the right recognition about the world of creating music: "This industry has not always been very friendly to everyone, including Stephanie, and I feel really blessed to be able to help out..., and as for Eric, I know that he will eventually be recognized as one of the greatest jazz artists of all time," Don adds.

He is also working with a gospel group headed by Adrian A.J. Wells who is located in San Diego. These singers are very unique. They are a diverse group from all backgrounds and all walks of life and they have a spirit that moves you. They call themselves "Adrian A.J. Wells" and The Ladies of Endless Worship," and they are a group that people need to hear. I am planning to get them out into a variety of churches and other venues in southern California. We have a new song titled "Faithful." This song is a great look at the potential of this ministry. Not only the ladies are beautiful singers they are soulful humans: the love they have for each other and their faith in A.J. is noticeable immediately. I love working with them all and I'm really excited about the future."

"I'm trying to set up a company that represents many different kinds of musical experiences. I have most of it covered now, with the exception of rock. The struggle is financial, considering that Chris and I are running the label on our Military paychecks, which are limited, but even with that the talent speaks for itself. I envision the company to be formatted after Def Jam Records mixed with Motown" Johnson adds.

Coming from a very rough beginning, a story that has drawn comparison to the Eminem movie, 8 Mile, Don Johnson's and Chris Davis's love of music and persistence have them poised to become very successful with their music company and the variety of artists that they are working with. "I'm very proud of the label we are building," Don says, "I'm proud of its diversity. This is music that matters, music that is inspirational and it deserves to be appreciated by as wide an audience as possible. That's what has me excited about my life and my plans for this coming year."

I have only one thing to add. Don Johnson and Chris Davis are outstanding young men, who are not only exemplary, but also truly inspirational, and not only to their own generation, but to all entrepreneurs who believe in a free spirited life and the pursuit of happiness despite all odds! The ultimate principals that this country has built on and nurtured for hundreds of years... Chris and Don are precious citizens of a land that needs to continue setting examples through its talents who dare to care!

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