

Music

The Rugged Life

RECORD INDUSTRY NIGHTMARE R.A. THE RUGGED MAN IS BACK FROM THE DEAD

BY JESSE SERWER

Not too long ago, R.A. The Rugged Man's reputation used to keep him out of the spotlight.

An unabashedly foul-mouthed, self-professed "lowlife scumbag" originally from Port Jefferson, R.A. was courted by the record industry as a teenage phenom in the early '90s before ultimately being barred from the offices of his own record label, sued for sexual harassment, blacklisted for life from numerous recording studios and, for three years, from the entire U.S. club circuit.

But, 10 years after the artist then known as Crustified Dibbs burned his first deal with Jive/RCA Records by turning in tracks like "Every Record Label Sucks D***" and "C*** Renaissance (a collaboration with Notorious B.I.G. that the label hoped would be a single), things are starting to turn around for R.A. Thorburn—and he hasn't had to make a single apology.

While the now-30-year-old MC may never get another invite to a major-label conference room, his third and latest solo album, *Die Rugged Man Die* (a second, *American Lowlife*, was shelved in 2000 when R.A. demanded \$1 million up front from Priority Records) is his first to actually hit stores. Despite a release through small Brooklyn indie Nature Sounds ("It's a 50/50 split, and I get to keep the masters," R.A. notes), the album and R.A. are enjoying some serious hype thanks to a new establishment of supporters in the media and record industry who are actually encouraged by his wild-child reputation.

Now a film columnist for hip-hop culture magazine *Mass Appeal*, R.A.'s been a regular contributor to hipster handbook *Vice Magazine*, which even tapped his paralyzed brother, Maxx (who has since passed away) and sister, Dee Ann, to review records just because they were, well, R.A.'s paralyzed siblings. Well-spoken and culturally astute, he's become the thinking

man's nasty rapper, a status that has translated into a deal with Testify Books, for whom he is currently completing a coffee-table tome on boxing, and features and appearances in recent and upcoming issues of more mainstream outlets like *Paper*, *XXL*, *Vibe*, *King* and *Rides*.

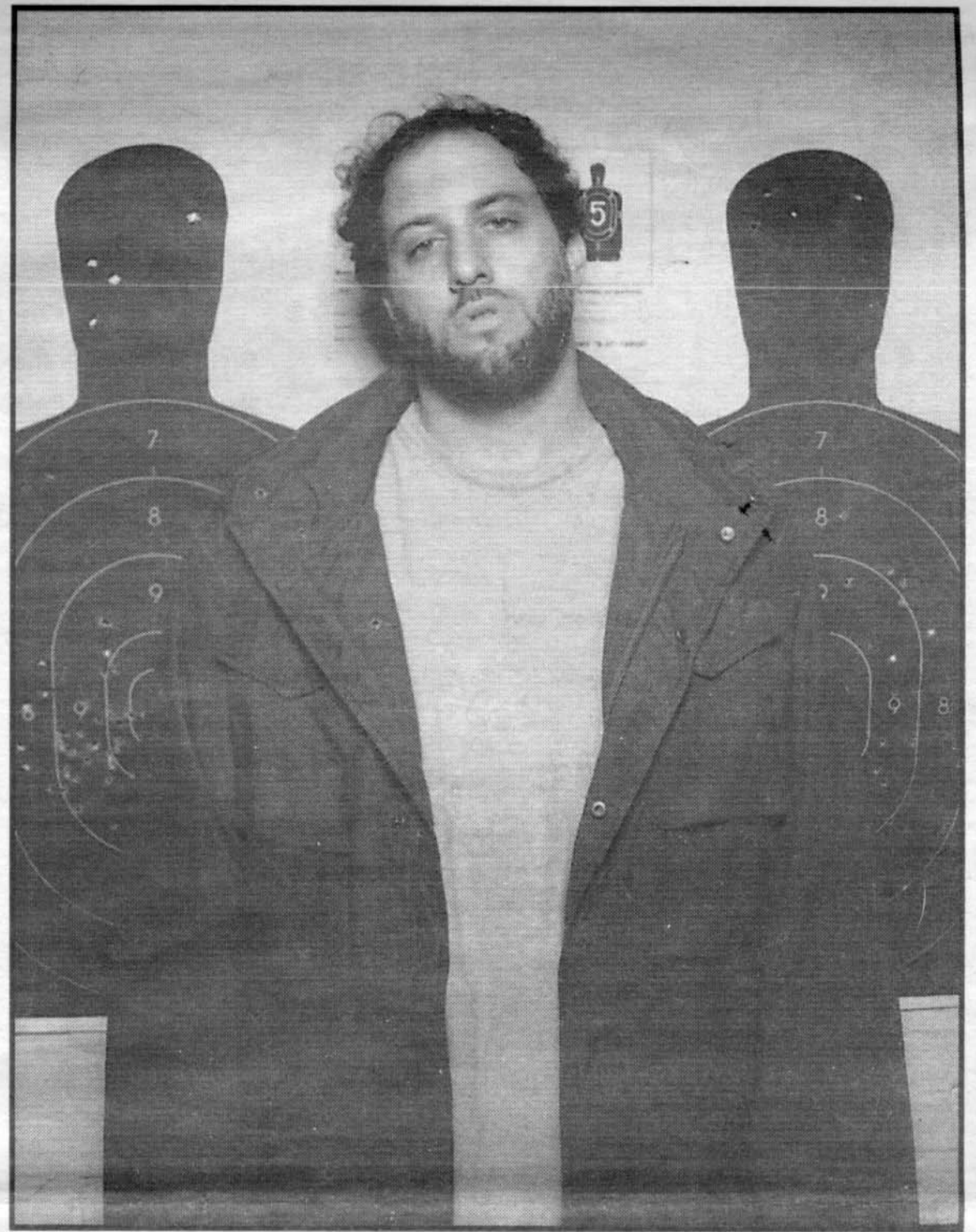
The way R.A. sees his new acceptance, it's pure poetic justice.

"All those motherf***ers who were scared of me before, who were like, [affects stuffy corporate voice] 'He has no respect, he'll never make it,' they're all on used-car lots, not s**t anymore, and I'm still here," the Rugged Man says from the lobby of a Williamsburg, Brooklyn building where he shares office space with Nature Sounds and a small film company. "Now these youngbloods have come up, who were scared of me as kids, but they liked being scared, and now they're editors of magazines."

Wearing a button-down shirt emblazoned with Polaroids of naked models and his unkempt, balding hair under a "Vietnam Veteran" hat, R.A. finds irony in his new, more respectable status. "I have a book deal, and I am not even a real writer. I went to three high schools and the most I ever had was a 1.6 average."

Perhaps a book *on* R.A. would be more appropriate. Raised by a mentally and physically scarred Vietnam vet father with 25 different addresses by the time R.A. graduated from high school, he overcame mental illness and learning disabilities before becoming one of the first white rappers to be taken seriously on the New York City battle rhyme circuit. But his naiveté, acerbic tongue and unwillingness to compromise led to his downfall and found him broke, sometimes homeless and unable to land a gig in the United States until the second phase of his career making sporadic underground singles (like 1996's "Smithaven Mall") and appearing on Rawkus Records' *Soundbombing* compilations in the late '90s.

"I did this one showcase in 1994 and



On Target: R.A. the Rugged Man ain't dead yet.

started a 700-man riot," R.A. explains rather matter-of-factly of the situation that led to his instant barring from every hip-hop venue across the country in the mid-'90s. "The next day I got a call from every place we had booked saying, 'Yo, you can't do this show.' Biggie always thought I was purposely trying to ruin my career. He'd call me screaming: 'Yo, you're right there, you're one of the best out there, why do you want to destroy it?'"

Looking back on his life and career, though, R.A. says he wouldn't change a single thing.

"I couldn't ask for anything more perfect than what happened. Maybe if I got that million dollars, I could have had a big, famous one year. So what? I have seen so many rappers be mad famous for a year. I spread out the little tiny fame through 12 years, and I've lasted a lot longer than a lot of these rappers who played [the corporate] game. The only thing I could use is a little more money. I got the chicks—everybody's always known that R.A. had the bitches. I have been in so many famous rich rappers'

houses banging out their girlfriends and wives and baby's mammas, then [being disoriented by] seeing their little kids that look just like the famous rapper."

Kicked off by lead single "Lessons," a blow-by-blow account of the past 10 years' drama ("I've watched mad rappers bite my s**t and blow up/Make millions off what I created/That's tough luck"), *Die Rugged Man Die* marks the beginning of a third, more peaceful phase of his career, and, at 13 songs, is actually two short albums combined into one.

"It was originally supposed to be a double EP—if you listen to it, it changes up halfway. But Nature Sounds tricked me into doing an album. Believe it or not, I have never wanted to do a full-length," says R.A. "I just wanted to continue pimping record labels for money, bootlegging my own s**t. Letting the money-people pay my rent and phone bills without being in their system, participating in their s**t." ❖

Die Rugged Man Die is out now on Nature Sounds. www.nature-sounds.net.