

■ *The Source*, the thuggish hip-hop magazine under attack from all sides, snarled its way into 50 Cent's opening-weekend hype for *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. Radio station Hot 97 greeted the movie with a blitz of promotions tagged "A G-Unit Weekend." Meanwhile, barking from every city newsstand, the November *Source* has 50 Cent and his labelmates on a cover headlined "G-Uno! Is Corporate Rap's Top Unit Fading Fast?" Spreading the attack, a separate article accuses Hot 97 DJ Funkmaster Flex of payola.

When 50 Cent himself showed up in the Hot 97 studio of Funkmaster Flex on a recent Thursday-evening shift, the pair spent precious airtime stoking the feud. "I gotta ask you about this wack rapper Benzino," Funkmaster Flex said, referring to *The Source* co-owner Raymond Scott by his performing name. Hearing it, 50 Cent began to murmur menacingly.

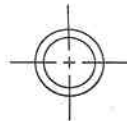
A few days later, on allhiphop.com, Scott upped the ante, asserting that Flex "talks a lot of trash [on the air] and when he leaves, he has a group of security



guards, but one day he is going to slip, and when we do collide you are going to hear about it."

People really do get hurt for less beef than this, especially around Hot 97, where broadcast taunts have preceded flying bullets, and especially around *The Source*, which has picked countless fights since its birth in 1988. But given the number of hits they're taking—tens of millions in credit claims and lawsuits, arrests, even murder charges against key staffers—it's amazing that Scott, fellow co-owner David Mays, and rookie editor Dasun Allah can put out a magazine at all. Just keeping track of the major court cases advancing this month is a task.

On November 30, a Los Angeles Superior Court judge will review an arbitrator's ruling that *The Source* must pay \$7.5 million to CD-DVD distributor Image Entertainment. The company says two hip-hop compilations it paid Source Entertainment to produce »Hunter p28



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were never delivered, and that *The Source* never got permission from the artists to use the music on the CDs it did deliver.

On October 31, Textron Financial Corporation asked a New York State Supreme Court judge to put *The Source* into receivership. Textron says it's owed \$18 million. In the suit, the company accuses Mays and Scott of doing little bookkeeping, buying "promotional jewelry," and traveling on vacations while rent, bills, and state and federal taxes languished unpaid.

On November 28, general manager Leroy "Bum" Peeples and marketing director Alvin "Wiz" Childs are expected to answer to charges of attempted murder in front of a Manhattan Criminal Court judge. Peeples and Childs were arrested in July following a shoot-out in a bar that left three people seriously injured. Police say the shots were fired during an argument in Chelsea's Limerick House over whether or not to play a particular rap CD. The two execs have pled not guilty, says their lawyer.

On November 22 (as the *Voice* went to press), also in Manhattan Criminal Court, editor in chief Dasun Allah (formerly known as David Blanks) will find out if he is to be indicted for criminal mischief. Police say on October 20 he desecrated a Jehovah's Witness assembly hall in Harlem with graffiti. Allah, who has earned growing respect for his editorial vision as well as concern over his emotional volatility, spent the night in jail after his lawyer surrendered him to police.

And then there's the looming sexual discrimination and harassment lawsuit. On November 7, lawyer Ken Thompson received the right-to-sue letter from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission he had requested on behalf of former editor in chief Kim Osorio and former marketing director Michelle Joyce. In their EEOC complaint, the women say they were sexually harassed, physically threatened, and ultimately fired in retaliation for complaining about abuses condoned by Mays and Scott. The EEOC investigation was terminated without finding. Thompson says he's filing suit next week in Manhattan federal court.

*The Source* is hitting back, in street-fighting form and in the courts. Lawyer Mercedes Colwin—who makes frequent appearances on Fox and MSNBC—says she's ready to go. In an e-mail to the *Voice*, she calls the EEOC complaint "one very bad rap" and says *The Source* will achieve "complete vindication" as it does not "discriminate, harass, or retaliate on any basis including gender" and that the company "looks forward to proving it is not liable in the event it even gets to court."

Mays calls "the misleading and patently false attacks on our character . . . hurtful," but Scott declined requests for comment. Peeples (*The Source*'s third-ranking executive after Mays and Scott) and Childs did not respond to repeated requests for comment on the attempted-murder charges, but lawyer Mel Sachs says they have been "wrongfully accused."

Editor in chief Allah, a member of an Islam-based religious group called Nation of Gods and Earth, did discuss his arrest. He told the *Voice* that the alleged graffiti incident had "nothing to do with *The Source*" and everything to do with his "personal history with organized religion and the

Jehovah's Witnesses in particular." (He declined comment on any *Source* topic, including the defamation suit pending against the magazine stemming from an article he wrote last year making fun of hip-hop writers. Sacha Jenkins of *Spin* and *XXL* is suing in State Supreme Court for \$150,000.)

The recent revival of *The Source*'s front-of-the-book must largely be credited to Allah, an intern in 2001 for *Voice* investigative reporter and senior editor Wayne Barrett. The Hurricane Katrina spread in the November issue outpaced competitor *XXL*'s catch-up job in December. An ambitious cover story package in the December issue considers the impact of the criminal-justice system on hip-hop.

In addition to recharging its feature articles, *The Source*'s co-owners have come out swinging in the courts to defend what's left of their business credibility. On October 19, *Source* Entertainment filed a \$100 million suit against Black Entertainment Television, accusing executives of pulling out of a deal to televise the annual *Source* Awards slated for last month. A BET statement said only that it was Mays who failed to up-

hold his end of the deal, but one can guess at why BET's owner, Viacom, might rethink its relationship with the (indefinitely postponed) awards show. In 2001 *The Source*'s former network broadcaster, UPN, called it quits after a riot broke out at the Pasadena show the year before.

Multiplying problems have affected how advertisers perceive *The Source*. Cris Dinozo of the Publisher's Information Bureau says last year the magazine stopped paying its dues to the organization, which tracks advertising pages. Steve Cohn, CEO of *Media Industry Newsletter*, points to a downward trend since 2000, when ad pages in *The Source* reached a height of 1,648 for the year. Cohn, who gets his data from internal sources at the magazine, says that by the end of 2004 *The Source* was down to 1,149 ad pages, and this year it's at 779 ad pages.

Fewer people, it appears, are reading *The Source*. It's hard to know, because in 2004 it pulled out of the Audit Bureau of Circulations. Textron in its lawsuit asserts that *Source* circulation hovers around 250,000—half of what it was two years ago. By way of comparison, the primary *Source* competitor, *XXL*, has an ABC-certified circulation of 314,355.

The magazine's revenue has also nosedived, according to the Textron lawsuit. The lending company estimates 2005 sales at \$20.7 million, a \$5.1 million drop from the previous year. Profits have disappeared, says Textron, which asserts that *The Source*'s net loss will rise above \$2 million, more than twice the 2004 loss. All evidence to the contrary, Chris Flatley, associate publisher of *The Source*, calls the magazine "the number-one selling music magazine on newsstands in the world." And that "many of corporate America's largest consumer marketers continue to embrace *The Source* for its honest and thought-provoking coverage."

■ There once was a time when calling *The Source* the "bible of hip-hop" made sense. As *Wired* was to geeks, as *Deneuve* was to dykes, so *The Source* was to the hip-hop generation. Its anomalous conception in

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Former marketing director Michelle Joyce (left) and editor in chief Kim Osorio

Erin Kennedy

the dorm room of two white Harvard students in 1988 didn't much get in the way, because by the early 1990s David Mays and Jon Shecter had cobbled together a multiracial dream team of devotees who, in a few short years, transformed a xeroxed newsletter into a widely respected glossy fat with ads.

Subjects that mattered to black kids and wannabes were given regular, serious treatment. "We had the greatest interviews; there were no publicists—we had pager numbers for when something went down," says Reginald C. Dennis, one of the first music editors. "Hip-hop wasn't media savvy then. It was young black people speaking their minds—people who had never been given the opportunity to speak."

Trouble began in November 1994—when *The Source* was at its zenith. It came in the form of a long, fawning profile of the Almighty RSO, a rap group fronted by Benzino, the big-mouthed Boston rapper who would later reveal himself as co-owner of the magazine. Mays felt his sidekick deserved some press; the *Source* staff disagreed. So Mays himself wrote a feature on RSO and slipped it in behind the editors' backs. There was an editorial-side exodus, with the highly regarded editor in chief James Bernard writing an emotional resignation letter to the hip-hop community. The scandal destroyed

*The Source's* editorial credibility.

"Every two or three years there's a big upheaval and the whole editorial staff changes over," says Jeff Chang, author of the hip-hop history *Can't Stop Won't Stop*. "You get to the point where you're chasing away so much talent—at a certain point it becomes unsustainable."

"It's been like watching Rome burn," says former *Source* writer Kenji Jasper.

Obvious cronyism and erratic critical standards have continuously afflicted its music reviews department. Editor in chief Fahiyim Ratcliffe, Dasun Allah's predecessor, resigned in August after a dispute with Mays over a music rating. "You want to work for someplace that you believe in," Ratcliffe told the *Voice*. "If there are constant clashes with owners, then you have to remove yourself."

But more than the internal scandals, it was the relentless campaign against Eminem that turned off readers. In 2002, Scott worked tirelessly to persuade readers that the rapper is a bigot, backing up the charges by playing old recordings to reporters featuring a 15-year-old Eminem disparaging black women and big butts and niggas. Few observers disputed Scott's claim that part of Eminem's success is due to his color, but it raised another question: Where would Raymond "Benzino" Scott be if it weren't for his Caucasian best friend and cheerleader

David Mays?

Eminem responded with an apology and an explanation: He said he wrote the lyrics because he was pissed off over a breakup with a black girl. The confession turned the controversy into old news, but not to Benzino. A drawing of him holding Eminem's severed head showed up in the February 2003 issue, and he rapped about him in several tracks of his own. "You the rap David Duke, you the rap Hitler, the culture stealer," he spat out on his single "Die Another Day."

The endless Eminem vitriol also proved costly—music ads from Def Jam and Interscope disappeared. "Mays made some bad decisions. The mission of the magazine has been warped and perverted to fit Benzino's obsessions," says self-described grizzled hip-hop veteran Bill Adler. "The attacks on Eminem are transparent and pathetic—nobody in hip-hop cares."

■ **Last April, when the full texts of Kim Osorio's and Michelle Joyce's EEOC harassment complaints were posted on sohh.com, fans got an eyeful of an editorial office resembling something out of a Pam Grier movie. Judging from the allegations, the Chelsea offices sorely needed a Foxy Brown character to kick in the door and beat the hell out of the misogynist idiots described in the documents.**

It's not that anyone was really surprised that a workplace usually described as a men's locker room complete with Vaselined-girl-bending-over posters on the walls and rappers-cum-execs slap-boxing in the halls could be sexist. The former executives' complaints detail more than how they say women are treated. They describe a magazine where writers were forced to write untruthful articles about the publication's perceived enemies.

Says former associate music editor Miranda Jane: "Writers have to take their sides of any beefs. If you don't know the game, or if you can't keep track of who they were or weren't doing business with that day, you could have serious problems, the least of which was getting fired. For a man that could mean being put in a state of fear. For a woman—going to work each day being called a whore."

In the complaint, Osorio accuses Mays of allowing a male writer to "degrade her as a woman" and threatening to "knock her upside the head" in response to her asking about an article he hadn't turned in. Both Mays and Benzino, she charges, frequently "berated and humiliated" women employees, while men—many of them Benzino's old friends—were given a free pass. Osorio says she was fired in March after refusing to rescind a discrimination complaint she says she e-mailed to the company's human resources department.

Former vice president of marketing Michelle Joyce was there just over a year to Osorio's five, and says the men she was charged with supervising harassed her with impunity. One felt comfortable telling her he'd "give her something to suck on." Mays would "yell, curse at [her], and often ask whether [she] was 'fucking stupid' or 'some sort of asshole.'" According to her complaint, the climate was so toxic several female execs would "often hide in their offices and avoid walking through the corridors out of fear of being sexually harassed." She also claims that she was fired after complaining about the way women were treated.

Many female former *Source* employees agree that the office is exhaustingly sexist, but

not all women in the hip-hop world are willing to let Osorio completely off the hook. She was the editor in chief when the magazine many observers have noted, grew exponentially more shallow and sexist. It was Osorio who played the infamous Eminem tapes to reporters two years ago, and she who backed up many of Benzino's dubious claims. "While I believe the [EEOC] allegations, my feeling is that Kim was basically bitten by the dog she fed," writes *Essence* magazine writer E. Assata Wright in an e-mail.

"They used to address meaningful issues, gang truces, police targeting black and brown kids," recalls former *Source* writer Rachel Raimist, before coming to depend on "just one story all the time. Pimp and stripper culture-porn is the norm."

In answer to critics, Osorio (who recently started work as an executive editor at bet.com) says that decisions on content were often made on the business side. Besides, churning out sexist product does not exempt a business from following harassment and discrimination statutes, nor does the law care who someone might be sleeping with. Those concepts are lost on Mays and Scott. Soon after the complaint was made public they faxed a statement to reporters that said: "We find it peculiar that [Osorio] would make these allegations because during her tenure at *The Source* she had numerous sexual relations with artists. We have proof of this and we find it unacceptable..."

■ **Co-owners Mays and Scott don't view themselves as oppressors of women or anyone else—they've long positioned themselves as defenders of the little guy against the hip-hop industry "machine."**

Says Mays: "For the past few years, *The Source* has been the sole voice willing to speak out against the corruption, bribery, deceits and greed in the corporate Rap music industry that is destroying the greatness of Hip-Hop culture."

It's hard to argue with the first part, but the second half of his statement is more troubling. Former editor Ratcliffe (who now heads up *Smooth*, a King-like men's magazine) says that in spite of *The Source's* recent editorial successes, readers have stopped paying attention.

"Mays is a very smart man. He created the most important urban magazine in 15 years. But he and Benzino need to look at themselves with honest eyes," he says. "*The Source* is a shadow of itself. But even if its brand doesn't have the same luster it once had, it's still strong. But as long as you have Mays and Scott the industry will always look at them as the problem, even if their message is good."

Mays and Scott may have to jump ship in order to save *The Source*. "They opened the gates for the hip-hop lifestyle—they legitimized it," says Dr. Samir A. Husni, chair of the journalism department at the University of Mississippi. "But when the giant reaches the top of the mountain and hides his head in the clouds, he cannot see what's going on the ground."

If Mays and Scott do get knocked out, there are plenty of takers. Hip-hop deal maker Stuart Stoute told Hot 97 he'd like to take over, and Jay-Z's name has floated about. Still, Mays and Scott are going down fighting—in the courts and perhaps in the street.

Meanwhile, *Source Enterprises* has christened two foreign-language versions—*The Source Latino* and *Nouveau the Source* (French). Judging from recent events, at *The Source* and abroad, a magazine devoted to thug activism might be a lucrative export. ♦