

An explosive look at the music industry's dark side.

BLACKOUT: My 40 Years in the Music Business

by Paul Porter

Order the complete book from the publisher

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/9204.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

BLACKOUT

MY 40 YEARS IN THE MUSIC BUSINESS



PAUL PORTER

BLACKOUT:

My 40 Years in the Music Business

Paul Porter

with Reva G. Harris and Lauren Carter

Copyright © 2017 Paul Porter

ISBN: 978-1-63492-384-2

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

This is a work of nonfiction. Some names and other identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy and anonymity of the individuals involved.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2017

First Edition

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	vii
Chapter 1: I Got the Message.....	1
Chapter 2: The Queens Kid.....	11
Chapter 3: Music Education.....	16
Chapter 4: Music as Business.....	25
Chapter 5: Being Pimped.....	42
Chapter 6: Now I See It.....	57
Chapter 7: Crossing the Line.....	73
Chapter 8: The Era of the Shock Jock.....	97
Chapter 9: Regulating the Industry.....	108
Chapter 10: Corporate Decisions.....	114
Chapter 11: Music, Media and Modern Youth Culture.....	122
Chapter 12: Lessons Learned.....	127

Chapter 7: Crossing the Line

Initially, I thought seeing Lee just was a bad dream. Was I imagining things? Lee Michaels? Here at WBLS? The more I thought about it, though, the more it made sense that Kernie Anderson, the new General Manager who had replaced Pierre Sutton, would bring his old colleague on board.

Kernie and Lee had worked together at WBMX in Chicago. I thought Kernie was a nice guy, but as far as I was concerned, his decision to hire Lee Michaels as the Program Director was a formula for the station's failure. I'd learned a lot from my days at Majic. I knew Lee Michaels knew nothing about New York City and that he wouldn't be able to bring anything of value to the table to help WBLS out of its slump. Lee was a pop music guy; he didn't have an ear for the music our listeners wanted to hear.

I'd also learned that it wasn't my job to try to figure out how to save the station. I was not disappointed that I didn't get the job as Program Director. It just never occurred to me that Lee Michaels would get it. Lee started off flashing a few fake smiles and pretending that he and I liked each other. I paid him no mind and continued to commute back and forth to D.C., still working for BET part-time and trying to get more voice-over work.

It was during this time that Nielsen's Broadcast Data Systems (BDS) service began to catch on. The BDS service tracked and monitored the airplay of songs based on the number of spins and detections. Before BDS, Program Directors would write down on paper what they were playing on the radio and submit the information to whoever wanted it. If a disc jockey wrote down that she was playing Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing" 20 times per week, music publications like *Billboard* assumed that the station was keeping accurate records.

Of course, that procedure led to corruption. Record companies had been paying for "adds" or additions to radio playlists since the

beginning of commercial radio, but how did they know who was really playing the record and how often? They didn't. And many Program Directors would add songs to the playlist, be paid for adding them and never actually play the records. But with the advent of BDS, paper tracking of adds was over. Now, the record labels knew exactly what stations were playing their records and when their records were being played.

BDS would present a bit of a problem for Lee Michaels, who flourished in the old school world of payola-friendly radio. When he came to WBLS, Lee quickly became notorious for adding as many new songs as he could in any given week. I thought Frankie was bad for having us play Maxwell's "Ascension" over and over, but Lee Michaels took record adds to new levels. He was colluding with several independent promoters who brought music and cash to Program Directors in exchange for getting spins for their clients' records.

The rumor around the office was that Lee charged \$2,500 to add a song to the playlist. In one week, Lee added 17 records, when no radio station would ever add more than five records in a typical week. I could only imagine how much money he got that week. But it was beginning to catch up with him. The station wasn't playing all the records he was adding, and now with BDS sending out detailed lists, the labels were getting angry. For a while, Lee blamed it on the Nielsen BDS system, claiming that it wasn't properly reporting the songs the station was playing. Eventually, the record labels would start calling up the disc jockeys to get a better sense of what was being played. Lee was slowly being exposed. It didn't seem to matter, though, because he continued to receive valuable perks.

Around the time that Lee Michaels was adding records every week in a frenzy, I got an interesting phone call. I was one of the first customers to have the caller ID feature, and I looked at my display and saw the name Joey Bonner, an old school indie promoter who was known as the best in the business.

I'd known Joey for years. Back when I was working at WKYS, I'd seen him at a convention in Atlantic City. Something had gone wrong with my reservation, and I didn't have a hotel room. Joey Bonner got me a room and told me to think nothing of it. Later that night, I watched him playing Baccarat in the casino. He won \$40,000 in 12 minutes. He told me I was good luck, gave me \$1,000 and walked out.

I had no idea why Joey Bonner would be calling me now. I answered, and it was Lee Michaels on the phone.

"What's up Lee?" I said.

"Hey, Paul Porter," Lee said. "I wanted to make sure you had my new phone number."

He was living rent-free in a \$4,000 a month apartment owned by Joey Bonner. Lee was too stupid to update the phone service, so the number was in Joey's name. To make matters worse, everyone knew that Frankie Crocker had lived in the same apartment when he was at the station. We had a good laugh behind Lee's back. While he was pretending to be the man, living in a fancy spot, we all knew that he was just shacking up in Joey's crib.

Lee had put together a radio promotion for Labor Day weekend. His plan was to play music mixes from his days at WBMX for the entire weekend. Every hour, we would give away \$1,075 to the 107th caller. It was a typical promotion, but as usual, Lee had the logistics all wrong. First of all, we weren't actually promoting anything; we were just playing old music. A promotion should be tied to something — it could be as simple as station identification, where you make the winning caller give you the "phrase that pays" in order to get them to listen and pay attention. But there were no parameters to his contest. For the entire weekend, we gave away \$60,000 for no good reason.

Here's the worst part: Lee decided to hold the contest during a holiday weekend when most people were away on vacation. So even with the contest running, we had fewer callers than usual. It was pathetic. In fact, it was so unofficial that all of the jocks just gave the money away to people we knew. On my shift, I'd be on the

air, pretending to answer the phones and count down to the 107th caller and then — surprise — it would be one of my friends on the line, who actually lived in Boston and couldn't even hear me. I had a friend whose daughter was going off to college and — surprise! — she was a 107th caller too.

Yes, it was unethical. But by then, I was slowly getting sucked into the underbelly of the industry. Frankie was crooked, and Lee was as dirty as they came. Meanwhile, my boy Ricky, a Program Director for an AM station in Hartford, was tracking his payola in a composition notebook. Everyone was getting money and perks. I was working part-time and hustling to get voice-over work. I rationalized that giving away money to people who needed it was not as bad as what everyone else was doing. But of course, it all starts somewhere.

I assumed Lee wouldn't last much longer. He was too dirty and too sloppy, and sure enough, soon after he tried to add 17 new records to the playlist, he was fired. When I heard that Lee was gone, I asked Hal Jackson to consider Vinny Brown for the position. Vinny and I went back to my days in D.C. I thought he was a congenial guy, friendly and cool. He had been out of work for nearly a year when I recommended that Hal call him up. I wanted Vinny to get the job because I thought he was a good fit. I was also hoping that he would look out for me. Lee Michaels had me working overnights, and I knew Vinny would at least be able to get me a better shift.

Vinny did get the job, and I was happy to see him on board. But it didn't take long for me to see the *real* Vinny Brown. He wasn't the same nice guy I knew years before. He was a little *too* full of himself, and it wasn't cool. He came in boasting about the changes he was going to make: Hal Jackson's Sunday show would be cut to halftime, and Champagne, one of the DJs, would be fired.

Although Vinny had a pop radio voice that belonged in a McDonald's commercial, he made himself the voice of the station and redid all of the WBLS promotions using his voice. Fortunately, that ended up being the only major change he made, as Kernie

Anderson blocked Vinny's other ideas. Vinny seemed to quickly grow frustrated and disillusioned.

Vinny did switch me to a better shift on Saturdays, but other jocks didn't fare as well. Raymond Anthony was one of the highest paid jocks on the station. Vinny didn't like Raymond and wanted to fire him, but Raymond was protected by his contract. During Vinny's first week on staff, he screamed at Raymond for something meaningless while Raymond was on the air. This would become a signature Vinny Brown move — calling a jock while they were on the air to curse them out. Raymond was upset, and I thought Vinny's behavior was rude and ridiculous.

It was only a matter of time before Vinny would start in on me, too. During one of my shows, I broadcasted live from Black Expo, a multi-day shopping exhibit at a convention center. During the day, Mike Tyson's manager came over and asked if I'd like to interview the boxer, and I agreed. I interviewed Tyson briefly and got a call from Vinny while I was on the air.

"Yo, motherfucker," he said. "Did I say you could interview Mike Tyson?"

I had spent the entire day talking to old ladies who'd bought ceramic figurines, and here he was cursing me out about a Mike Tyson interview?

"I ain't say interview no motherfucking Mike Tyson!" he screamed. Then he hung up on me. If he would have said that to my face, I might have beaten him down. All I could do was curse him out before he hung up. After that, he didn't schedule me for a shift for two weeks. That was his favorite way to punish jocks: hurt them in the pockets. In New York, missing two shifts on the weekend could mean not having enough money to pay rent.

I'm not sure what had happened to Vinny. I don't know if he started feeling important because he was in New York. He seemed to forget that I knew him when he was struggling to get ahead, using his weak voice on a country music station. But I know it happens all the time — people get a bit of status and forget where they came from.

Vinny Brown stayed at WBLS until it closed down. He became like a member of the Sutton family. Ever since WBLS scored Wendy Williams for the afternoon drive slot, and later, Steve Harvey, Vinny started strutting around with his chest poking out like a peacock. He takes credit for bringing Wendy's popular show to the station, but it was actually General Manager Kernie Anderson who made that happen.

I speculate that one of the reasons why Vinny's personality changed was the way record label reps treated him. Record reps are experts at making Program Directors feel important. I know Vinny took free trips to Brazil and hung out in strip clubs with various record execs. From what I'd heard, Vinny had gone right into Lee Michaels' mode, charging labels — through their independent promoters, of course — up to \$2,000 to add a record to the WBLS playlist.

I knew things were getting out of hand in terms of payola when I went to visit an old friend who worked in promotions at Sony. At his office on Madison Avenue, he showed me the contents of his briefcase; it was loaded with cash. I asked him how much. He winked, smiled and told me it was over \$10,000. He was on his way to D.C. to take a Vice President at Radio One out to dinner. I knew Vinny had to be getting serious cash, too, but he probably wasn't getting as much money as that VP at Radio One, since Vinny only programmed one station, while Radio One owned several stations across the country.

In my personal life, I'd gone through a rough patch. Since coming to New York, I'd lost my first girlfriend, JoAnn, whom I'd reconnected with when I came back to town. My first boss Sunny Joe White had passed away, and my good friend, musician George Howard, had succumbed to colon cancer when he was only 36 years old. It was a sad time for me. Plus, I'd hit a cold streak with voice-over work. By 1999, the jobs were few and far between. Being in New York with no money was definitely not fun. Vinny was playing games, putting me on the schedule only when he felt like it.

Nevertheless, in my life, whenever one door closes, another always miraculously opens. When I was a young jock in Boston, Donnie Simpson moved me to D.C. for the job of a lifetime. I was devastated when I was fired, but before I could even digest it, I was working for Cathy Hughes at Majic. Then, after she fired me, I was working at BET before I could even get over my anger.

Now, while languishing in New York, working part-time at WBLS and searching for nonexistent voice-over work, another dream job was about to land in my lap. On a Thursday in March of 1999, I got a phone call from Cindy Mahmoud, Vice President of Development at BET. Would I like to come in and work as Program Director? And could I start on Monday? The answers to both questions were a resounding “Yes.” In a matter of a few days, I left an erratic part-time position on a poorly rated station to become the Program Director at BET. I’d gone from powerless to powerful. Every urban record label executive in the country would be vying for my attention.

Soon after I accepted the job, I went to a party where Vinny Brown introduced me to music executive Kedar Massenburg.

“Kedar, this is Paul Porter,” Vinny said. “He’s one of my part-timers.”

“Yeah, I’m his part-timer,” I said, shaking Kedar’s hand. “And I’m also the new Program Director at BET. I look forward to working with you.” The look on Vinny’s face was priceless.

My job as Program Director came right in the nick of time. I was flat broke. It was getting to the point that I was making the rounds to visit folks at radio stations just so I could get new CDs and sell them for quick cash. I took a Greyhound bus to D.C. for my new job with less than \$80 to my name. When I left New York City to catch the bus, my boy Tony Johnson, then the Vice President of Publicity at Mercury/Def Jam Records, met me downstairs at Third and Park Avenue and gave me \$200. It felt like a fortune.

I wouldn’t be on staff at BET. I was hired as a contracted employee with a salary of \$60,000 per year. Cindy Mahmoud had been in a pinch to hire someone quickly. The day before she called

me, the previous Program Director, Greg Diggs, had resigned abruptly. I tried reaching out to Greg to find out why he'd left suddenly, but I couldn't get in touch with him. I'd heard that he was having a hard time balancing his spirituality with the video content on the station.

I found out later why Greg Diggs had quit his job. After seeing a video with a few raunchy lines and scenes in it, Greg told Sylvia Rhone she needed to edit some of the content. Sylvia had the video edited and resubmitted it. Greg still wasn't satisfied and asked for more edits. Sylvia said no. She'd already gone way over budget on the video and she expected him to start playing it — immediately. Greg stood his ground. He thought some of the images in the video were inappropriate and said he wasn't playing it without further edits. Sylvia took it up with Bob Johnson, who intervened and told Greg to play the video. Greg quit instead.

I gave Greg Diggs a lot of credit for that. He was the first person I knew to walk out on a good job because of his principles. Greg stood up for standards, while BET didn't. I could respect that, but I couldn't imagine that video content would pose a problem for me. I arrived in D.C. excited about my new job. The bus stopped at Union Station, a short distance from the Hotel George, where BET was putting me up. It was just a block away from the Hyatt, where I'd stayed when Donnie Simpson brought me down from Boston years before.

As soon as I got to BET, I met with Cindy Mahmoud. She told me to take a week to look over the system, meet with the show producers and figure out what the station needed. Cindy made it clear to me right away what she wanted: higher ratings.

"Paul," she told me more than once. "It's your show. Do what you have to do to get the ratings up." She couldn't say it enough. I didn't understand why ratings had suddenly become so important when they had never been important before, but I would soon find out.

On my first day, I went into Greg's computer to see the playlist of videos that were running on the channel. There were more than

1,000 titles in the library, and most of them were crap. BET had always had a reputation for playing anything and everything that was sent to them. It seemed to have gotten way out of hand.

I met with Craig Henry, the producer of “Rap City.” During my initial tenure at the station, BET highlighted “Video Soul” with Donnie Simpson. This time around, “Rap City” was BET’s most popular show. Shows like “Planet Groove,” “Video LP,” and “In Your Ear” had failed because BET tried to make cheap shows for a young audience. BET had become a rap music network, and they were down to “Rap City” as their anchor show.

What shocked me the most during that first day on the job was how stuck in the dark ages the station seemed to be. This was 1999, and no one at the company had an email address. Nothing was digitized. The library of songs was written on paper, and staff made manual entries of new videos that were added into rotation. I was shocked by the inefficiency.

BET did have the Selector software to schedule music, but they weren’t using it properly. Some shows had dead air because the time entered for the videos was incorrect. Some producers were scrambling to fill minutes of empty space when their shows didn’t fill the time allotted. And anyone who has ever watched BET knows the frustration of watching one show end with a certain video just to see the next show begin with the same video.

I knew I had a lot of work to do. I had to find a crew within the staff that I could trust, come up with a game plan and execute it. I had inherited Greg Diggs’ assistant, and I wasn’t happy with her. She was a sweet-acting woman who had worked at BET for so many years that we called her a “lifer.” It quickly became clear to me that industry executives had buttered her up for years in order to gain access to Greg, and she was trying to keep those contacts. It was funny. She was a deeply religious woman who listened only to gospel music and didn’t like the videos shown on BET. Yet she’d developed relationships with record labels to make sure those videos she detested got played. In exchange, they hooked her up with gospel CDs and tickets to gospel plays.

Those first few days, she was watching my every move to see if I was going to do things the way Greg did them. And she was constantly telling me how to do my job. I didn't confide in her. Just because I had inherited Greg's assistant didn't mean I was going to inherit Greg's way of doing business. Instead, I focused on the young people on staff. Two people stood out to me: Tuma Basa, who worked in the programming department, and Chezik Walker, who was a young producer. They were both talented and hardworking. I remember Tuma putting together a PowerPoint presentation for my first staff meeting. I could see that the other staff members were "hating on him" because he did a great job. Tuma didn't care what the so-called cool kids thought. I knew he would be good for my team. I made Tuma my new assistant, and Chezik became an unofficial member of my team.

Over the next week, we watched hundreds of videos. I couldn't make heads or tails of how most of the titles had been entered into the Selector software. I sent the hard drive to the DJ who had taught me the program. He said it was a waste of money for BET to have purchased the software if they were going to use it so ineffectively.

I wasn't ready to talk to anybody in the music industry yet, but the calls started coming in fast and furious. The week before, I had been walking the streets of New York, broke. Now, I was telling Tuma to let the record reps know that I would have to call them back.

Soon it would begin for me. Just like Frankie Crocker, Lee Michaels, Vinny Brown and countless others who had been lured in before me, I would start to believe my own hype and get sucked into everything I felt was wrong with the urban music industry. My boy Ricky from WBLS called, and I *did* speak to him. He congratulated me and told me I was going to get paid. He told me that the numbers I'd seen in his composition book were nothing compared to the money I would be offered to get videos on the air.

I knew that I was in a position that could come with payola perks, but I didn't know much about how that worked. I was just

happy to have a job. I wasn't about to tell a record rep that they had to pay me to get a video in rotation. I listened to my boy Ricky, but I didn't put much stock into what he was saying. I did know that I was suddenly very popular with all my old industry folks and even some I didn't know. My second day at BET, I got a call from a rep working for a popular urban record label.

"Hey Paul!" she said, as if we were old friends. "What size shirt do you wear?"

I had never met the lady, and she wanted to know my shirt size. The next day, I had a black jacket with my name stitched in it. The day after that, it was a box of designer label clothes with all the newest shirts, pants, and coats. Every label was sending boxes of CDs. I got at least 500 CDs in the first week.

After watching a mind-numbing number of videos, I decided I was going to cut 500 of them out of the library right away. If it was outdated, poorly shot, or just plain corny, the video was gone. I talked to everyone at the station, from camera operators to talent like Tigger, Joe Clair, and Big Lez, who were hosting "Rap City," and Rachel, who was hosting "Planet Groove." Most of the shows were just running videos, some even without a host or without voice-overs.

BET was on the air 24 hours a day, but I knew that most viewers watched in the evening, after school and after work, so I decided to focus on the hours of 4 to 8 p.m. and beef up the playlist. At the time, BET didn't play anything in heavy rotation; there were so many videos in rotation that even the most popular videos were airing, at most, only 13 or 15 times a week. I planned to shape the playlist as I did when I took over as Program Director for Cathy Hughes at Majic: I was going to shrink the library, play the hits and cut out the duds.

I knew drastic changes to the playlist were going to shock the urban music industry, but it had to be done. I was prepared to take the risk. I avoided talking to any label reps while I was deciding which songs would be put into heavy rotation, which songs wouldn't and which ones would be cut altogether.

Before I could finalize the playlist, I had other fires to put out. BET was the redheaded stepchild of the music video industry. It aired in 66 million households, while MTV was in 100 million households. Nevertheless, BET was responsible for launching a lot of careers. It was the only video outlet that focused on black artists, and it was important. Up until that point, the station was considered a steppingstone to get to MTV. But BET actually had a strong hand, and I was going to use it. I was determined to get the station some respect.

As I was planning the playlist, I looked up Sean “Puffy” Combs’ song with Nas, “Hate Me Now,” to see how often it was in rotation. I couldn’t find it anywhere in the computer, and then I was informed that I couldn’t find it because we didn’t have it. Puffy had given MTV an exclusive, and BET wouldn’t be able to play the video for another month. I called up Jeff at Bad Boy.

“There’s nothing we can do,” he said. “We’ve got a contract with MTV.”

“Give your boy Puff a message,” I said. “If he’s going to give exclusives to MTV, we will be exclusively not playing any videos by any of his artists.”

I was brash, cocky and making up my own rules as I went along. I didn’t feel beholden to anyone. Of course, my personality occasionally clashed with some of the artists who were featured on the channel. I was doing things differently, and not everyone was cool with it.

I met with producers of “Rap City,” who told me about being turned down by Master P, rapper and founder of No Limit Records, for an interview on location at an awards show. Master P told them he didn’t have time because he had to do an interview with MTV. I knew Master P’s history with BET — the station had practically made him. I asked my assistant to get his people on the phone, and I talked to Shelly at Profile Records. I told her about what had happened at the awards show and that we’d be boycotting Master P in protest. She said, “You can’t do that!” I said, “Watch me.” I pulled his videos off the station.

A few weeks after I'd initiated the Master P blackout, I received a phone call: The voice had a New Orleans drawl.

"This is P. Why you ain't playing my shit?" he said.

I told him until he gave BET respect, I was not playing anything by him or his artists.

The next day, Master P came to my office. He was into wrestling, and he brought some wrestlers with him. He opened my office door, and I pulled out my Smith & Wesson 9 millimeter gun.

"Hey man, sit down," I said. "We're not going to have any Steve Stoute and Puffy-type trouble in here, are we?" I asked Master P, referring to the champagne bottle beat-down Puffy had given out the week before.

His assistant said to me, "Man, you are crazy?"

I said, "You can't diss BET and go to MTV if this is where your bread is made."

He looked at me as if he were sizing me up. "I like this nigga," he said with his flashy smile.

We sat down to watch the video he'd brought, "Souljahs." It was an animated video, and Master P went on and on about how it cost \$1 million to make and how it was going to make history. I had never seen such a horrible video in my life. It was a low-budget cartoon with toy army men that came to life and started rapping.

As awful as his video was, I put it into rotation, but there wasn't enough money printed in the world that would make me play that corny video more than five times per week. We only played the video for two weeks before we dropped it from the playlist entirely. I put Master P's other videos back on, and we became friendly.

I knew I had power, but I didn't know how crazy it could get until I got a call from Dorsey James, the President of LaFace Records. He wanted to make sure I was going to play the video for Donell Jones' "Say What." I already knew of and liked the song; we'd played it on WBLT. I knew I was going to play the video, and I told him not to worry about it.

But Dorsey wasn't taking any chances. He told me that he was about to hire someone to work in video promotion, and he'd narrowed it down to two candidates. He wanted me to choose who should get the job. I was puzzled. Why the hell would I choose who got the job? I didn't work for the record company.

"Since you'll be working closely with whoever we hire, it's important that it's someone you'll be able to get along with," he told me. I thought that was just crazy. They were basically asking me choose the person so that I would be invested; they figured if I chose the candidate, I'd take the calls, play the videos and in general have a favorable relationship with the label. I ended up choosing Chanel Green, who worked for Jive. She was a single mother, and I've always had a weakness for kids.

JC Ricks, the National Promotions Director for LaFace, told me that Dorsey wanted to send me a present, and asked me what I needed. I thought about what my boy Ricky from WBLS said about getting paid. Were they asking me if I wanted cash? I wasn't sure, and I wasn't trying to find out. I told him I needed a cell phone. When Dorsey, JC, and I went out to lunch the next day, they brought me a Motorola flip phone that had just come on the market. Over lunch, as they continued to beat me over the head about the Donell Jones video, they offered me more perks, like trips to exotic locations. I listened and nodded. It all sounded good. I opened the phone up at the end of the lunch, but it wasn't activated. JC told me to just send him the bill after I got the phone turned on.

I knew it wasn't legal to get a free cell phone or a leather jacket, but I assumed those were the perks of being a Program Director for a major station. It didn't seem like a big deal to me. I knew there were people at BET who were getting much more than a free cell phone.

After three weeks, I was ready to send out my first playlist. I emailed it — a first at the station — and waited for the yells and screams. If a label had five videos, I ended up cutting about three of them. The two remaining videos went from three spins a week to 15 spins a week. That created a problem. In my meetings, I'd tried

to explain: My plan was to play new videos a lot, during the early life of the album, when labels were pushing for sales. On the back end, I was taking the videos off as they climbed up the chart to make room for the next soon-to-be hits. I had no intention of continually playing the videos until viewers got sick of them. I loved Q-Tip's "Vivrant Thing," and it went from zero spins to being the Number 1 video on the network. Record reps were pissed off! I didn't care. Sometimes, you have to take drastic measures to create change. I wasn't backing off, not even when it came to the artists who'd enjoy carte blanche at the station for years.

One of the few people who appreciated the new order of business was Kevin Liles at Def Jam. His artists, including Ja Rule, got lots of airplay around the time of their album release, which led to strong first week sales. Things were working the way they were supposed to work. I had the acts playing in heavy rotation on the station and, in turn, the labels were getting decent sales.

In order for this to work well for the labels, the acts had to be hot. Arista Records was struggling with superstar diva acts like Toni Braxton and Whitney Houston. One of the first people I had to battle with was Lionel Ridenour at Arista Records. The last time I saw him, we'd driven to a mutual friend's wedding together. I was cool with Lionel, but I'd heard that, like Vinny Brown, he turned into a yeller and a screamer when he got into a position of power.

Lionel was working Whitney Houston's latest album, *My Love Is Your Love*. The title single was awful, and the video was worse. I had the video on my new playlist 12 times a week, which was a lot for that song. But Lionel was pissed because it wasn't getting the 28 spins per week that "Vivrant Thing" was getting. He called me up to complain, and I tried to explain my new formula. He wasn't trying to hear it.

"You're playing Donell Jones 20 times a week!" he yelled.

I had to look at the phone and shake my head. "Donnell Jones is your artist too!" I said. I didn't know that executives like Lionel were being instructed to push harder for Arista artists as opposed to those distributed by Arista for LaFace.

“Look man,” I said to Lionel. “What do you want me to do? You want me to flip Donell’s number of spins with Whitney’s?”

I knew he’d never go for that. In all honesty, I was just being cocky.

“No,” Lionel said. “I want you to flip Q-Tip’s spins for Whitney’s. She’s an icon.” Lionel hung up on me.

Yeah, I thought to myself, she’s an icon, but that song sucks.

Four days later, my assistant told me that Cindy Mahmoud wanted to see me in her office. Cindy’s office was a long walk away from mine, so I knew it couldn’t be good news. Lionel Ridenour had written a memo to Bob Johnson and sent a copy to Cindy. It was a strongly worded memo about a “serious problem” with airtime for one of Arista’s biggest acts, Whitney Houston, and how she was not getting the support she should from a label that supported BET. Lionel was going hard, implying that Arista would pull ads if BET didn’t play Whitney’s videos. Cindy told me not to worry about it. She said it was bad that he’d sent the memo directly to Bob Johnson, but that Bob had obviously received it and not responded. No news from him meant he wasn’t getting involved. Cindy told me to keep it moving and not give it another thought.

In typical Paul Porter style, I couldn’t just let it go. I wrote my response memo backed up with lots of research on Whitney’s record. The first week sales had been terrible. Her labelmate, newcomer Donell Jones, was playing on more radio stations than she was. And Q-Tip had sold three times as many albums in the same time period. According to my new formula for spins, Whitney’s video should have only been played six times per week. I was playing it twice as much.

I addressed my memo to Clive Davis and copied Lionel on it.

“Why did you send that memo to my boss?” Lionel asked me.

“At least I sent it to you, too,” I said. “I didn’t even know about your letter until someone showed it to me.”

“You know what?” Lionel said. “You need to talk to my man.”

“What man? Who is he?” I asked.

“He handles my problems,” Lionel responded.

I didn't know what Lionel was talking about. Was he going to send someone to beat me up?

"Do you have a cell phone?" he asked. *Yeah*, I thought to myself. *Your company is paying the bill.* I gave him the number and he told me to expect a call.

As soon as I hung up with Lionel, I called my boy Ricky and asked him if he knew the man. He started laughing. "He's the best," he told me. "Now you're about to see what I'm talking about."

Sure enough, I received a call on my cell. "I'm trying to get some more spins for Arista," he said. "Where are you staying?"

I gave him my address at the Hotel George. "You'll get a package from me on Saturday morning," he said before hanging up.

As soon as I heard the words "Saturday morning," I had a flashback. At WBLS, I used to talk to a guy who knew everyone's business. He'd told me something about Lee Michaels always getting cash from indie promoters who worked for the record labels, and it always came on Saturday mornings in a FedEx package.

All of the trips, the meals, the clothes, and the phone I had gotten were nothing. What I thought was payola was just year-round holiday gift giving. I had no idea how deep payola could get. But I knew I was about to find out.

That Saturday morning, I called the front desk first thing and told the woman there I was expecting a package and asked her to look out for it. She called me later that morning and told me the package had arrived. I ran downstairs at the speed of light and rushed back to my suite. The return label said "Karen Kline, Miami, Florida." There was no street address. I opened it up and saw two packs of \$100 bills wrapped in plastic. I counted \$5,000 in each pack. There was no note. Sunny Joe and Donnie Simpson did not bring me into the game to go dirty like this. But I was fed up with being broke. By that point I had two sons to take care of; one was in college with tuition bills.

I had watched Lee Michaels scam his way from station to station, getting fired every few years but still getting paid. I thought

about getting fired from Majic and getting a week's worth of severance pay. Now, I was at the top of the food chain, and I knew BET could be my last stop.

I decided I wasn't going to take money from just anybody. But I wasn't sending the money back to Karen Kline either. I also knew I still wasn't playing Whitney's video. I wasn't sure if there was a way I could take money from a select few to maintain relationships and still have some integrity in my programming choices. I put the money in my safe and decided I was going to try to find out.

The weekend after I received my first package from Karen Kline, I received another FedEx package that contained \$5,000 in cash. It included a letter telling me which record label the payment was from. The payments were not for particular songs; they were sent to maintain a relationship. The labels weren't telling me what to play. They just wanted me to be happy. I took the money and developed the playlist the way I wanted it.

Payola extended far beyond the packages from Karen Kline. Every weekend, I traveled back to New York for my weekend shift at WBLS, and I would hit up a different record label to pay my expenses — Jive, VP Records, Interscope, MCA, Motown, Def Jam. I never paid my own airfare or hotel costs. And I always insisted on staying at the Hotel Benjamin or the W Hotel, where rates could go for more than \$500 per night.

The well-known indie promoters had a discreet operation going, and I felt safe. They knew what they were doing, and I knew I wouldn't get in trouble for it. Some of the smaller labels and independent promoters were not as polished. One weekend, I was at a hotel in New York going through packages of videos that people had sent in. I got one from a New York DJ and his partner, who worked at Epic Records. They were trying to get a record deal for an act they'd discovered. I thought the guy sounded too much like The Notorious B.I.G., and I wasn't interested. But they were still on the grind, trying desperately to get the video on BET. I thought they were hustling backwards. They didn't have a record deal, and the rapper didn't have any radio airplay. But they were trying to

get the video on BET so that they could sell wolf tickets to the labels and get a deal. Without opening the package, I gave it to a friend. When he got home, he called me and said there was \$1,000 stuffed inside the package. I told him he needed to get back to my hotel room.

I couldn't believe that people were taking those kinds of risks. They didn't even tell me ahead of time that I was getting cash through the mail, like it was nothing. That's when I realized how pervasive payola had become. You didn't even need to meet with someone face-to-face. You just stuffed some cash in an envelope with the video and hoped for the best. I received a call to find out if I'd gotten the package. I used the fact that I wasn't expecting it as an excuse and told him I never got it. I never played the video, but I kept the money. It was official. I was on the take. I wasn't nearly as outlandish as I could have been, but it was enough to make me dirty.

Messing around with some of the low-level promoters got annoying. Willie Young, a D.C.-area producer and host of a local video show, was a prime example. All of the staffers of "Rap City" were flying down to Myrtle Beach for a "Ruff Ryders Weekend" sponsored by Ducati, the motorcycle manufacturer. Willie asked me if I'd like to host a show he was promoting in Myrtle Beach that weekend for R&B group Jagged Edge. He offered to pay me \$1,000, and I accepted. I was going to be there anyway with the staff of "Rap City," and an extra thousand dollars wouldn't hurt.

But the show was cancelled because no one showed up, and although Willie had paid me \$500 when I first arrived, after the show was cancelled, he was nowhere to be found with the other half of my money. I was determined to get my \$500, and I ended up using just the *idea* of payola to get my money back. After I returned from Myrtle Beach, I finally heard from Willie, who apologized for skipping out on me. He then asked me for a favor. He was trying to get a local act from Miami onto BET, and they had \$2,000 to spend to get the video on the air. I knew Willie's game. He would use his relationships with people like me to con local acts. He'd tell them

they needed \$3,000 to get a video on BET, then he'd tell me the group had \$2,000 and keep \$1,000 for himself.

I knew Willie was trying to make some money for himself, too, even though he was pretending like he was just trying to help the group. I didn't care either way. I knew the group was probably not good enough to get onto my playlist, and I knew all I wanted from Willie Young was my \$500.

I agreed to play the video for \$2,000. Willie Young flew up the very next day and came to my office at BET to give me the money. I took out \$500 and gave the rest of the money back to him.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I just wanted my money back," I told him. "You can get out now."

"Come on, Paul," he pleaded. "That's not right."

"You should have paid me in Myrtle Beach," I said. "I had to do what I had to do to get my money back." Willie left the video with me, and as I expected, it was garbage. I never played it.

Record companies had some slick ways of getting around payola, either by using indie promoters as middle men or finding creative ways to pay me directly.

Soon after I returned from Myrtle Beach, I spoke to Kevin Liles, then president of Def Jam. He asked me if I enjoyed the weekend, and I told him I did and said I fell in love with one of the Ducati bikes. Kevin offered me a side job recording a voice-over for a commercial for one of his new artists, an R&B singer named Case. The commercial would only air on one station in New York, and it would only take me a few minutes to record it. I agreed to do it, although I knew it would only make me a few hundred dollars. I recorded the commercial, and then I called Kevin's office to find out the amount I should put on the invoice I was sending to the company. The receptionist put me on hold and then came back on the line. She told me to put down \$8,000. I sent in the invoice and got a check a week later. I was obviously being paid for a lot more than just the 10 minutes of work I put into recording that commercial.

Within a year, I'd made at least \$40,000 in extra cash from indie promoters acting at the behest of major record labels and from executives who funneled cash to me other ways. Adding up the cost of travel expenses that many labels paid for would also tally into the thousands. But the cash wouldn't keep flowing for long. Those things never continue indefinitely. And after less than a year at BET, big changes were on the way.

Five months after I started at BET, Cindy Mahmoud called me into her office to let me know that Debra Lee, BET's Chief Operating Officer, was replacing her with someone new. Cindy wasn't being fired, just transferred to a post she'd held before, Vice President of Creative Services. Cindy was not happy about the decision, and she was making plans to leave the company. She told me her replacement was going to be Stephen Hill, a D.C. native who was working in MTV's programming department. I knew of Stephen Hill, but didn't know him well. I used to see him in D.C. at various concerts, and I knew he'd started his radio career at my old station, WILD in Boston. Everything I heard about him centered around the fact that he was a crossover guy; he liked rock music and was generally known as the black guy at MTV.

During the first meeting I had with Stephen, he didn't look me in the eye. I took that as a bad sign. He sat down with me and looked at the playlist and just nodded his head. He told me he liked all of the changes and that he wanted to have a meeting with me the next week before I added any new videos. Cindy Mahmoud had never asked to see the playlist. As Vice President, she concentrated on developing shows and extending the life of the brand, so I was surprised when Stephen said he wanted to be more hands-on with the videos I selected. He was supposed to be creating new programs, putting out fires, dealing with scheduling issues and talent, and determining BET's future. But it seemed like he was immediately more concerned with the music than the actual network.

The following week, I met with Stephen, who was spitting out questions left and right. Why was I adding this video? Why wasn't I

adding that video? He told me that MTV followed the charts and only added videos with at least 2,500 spins at urban radio. Stephen Hill was a numbers man, a nod I suppose to his degree in math. He wasn't the type to add a video because it was good. He wanted an external reason for playing a video.

I didn't agree with his methods. First of all, I knew a lot of radio stations were playing songs simply because there was a video out, not because the song was popular. I followed my gut instincts and I looked at sales. If consumers were actually buying a record, I thought that was a better indicator of which videos should be played. On this and many other issues, Stephen Hill and I just couldn't agree. Eventually, I'd walk down the halls of BET and Stephen would make sure to make moves in the opposite direction. If he couldn't get away in time, he'd keep his head down. I noticed that he talked mainly to the younger people on the staff. It seemed obvious that he wanted someone younger in my position, a protégé who would look up to him.

I just waited for the inevitable. Eventually, he called me in for what turned out to be a 30-second meeting. I walked into his office and, as usual, he didn't look me in the eye. He looked extremely nervous, like he thought I would beat him up if he said the wrong thing.

"I think I'm going to be going in a different direction," he said.

"What direction?" I asked.

"I'm going to bring in someone else to do the music, someone younger," he said.

"Just let me know when," I said.

The meeting was over. Although I remained at BET for months, I never spoke to Stephen Hill again. Somehow, he managed to never come within 10 feet of me. He went from the front entrance directly into his office and stayed there, making sure he didn't run into me. He hadn't fired me, so I continued programming the videos. He didn't ask any more questions about the videos I was adding or sit in on any meetings. I heard through friends in the industry that he

was interviewing people for the job, so I knew my days were numbered.

At that point, I developed an “F-you” mentality. When I knew I was on my way out, I added four or five videos that I normally wouldn’t have added in order to make sure I had some cash before I left. Previously, I’d turned down money from an NBA player’s record label, but before I left, I took the \$1,500 and added the video. Then Chris Webber had a video to go along with his failed attempt at becoming a rapper, so I scooped up a quick \$2,500 and put that on the air as well.

Stephen Hill never actually fired me. I’d heard he was bringing people in on the weekends to show them the ropes. A friend in the legal department warned me that my time was up. I found out that Kelly G, the man chosen by Stephen Hill to replace me, was staying in my hotel. I introduced myself and ended up taking him out to lunch a few times. Kelly seemed like a cool guy, straightforward and direct. I didn’t really understand his fashion style. He reminded me of Bernie Mac — print shirts, white pants and a shiny face — but I didn’t have any beef with him. I told him straight up that Stephen was out for himself and that he should be, too. He seemed to appreciate the words of wisdom, but I knew what was in store for him, and I was right. Kelly G was known for not having any control over what played on BET. Before he did anything, he had to check with Stephen Hill. Stephen knew that wasn’t going to work with me.

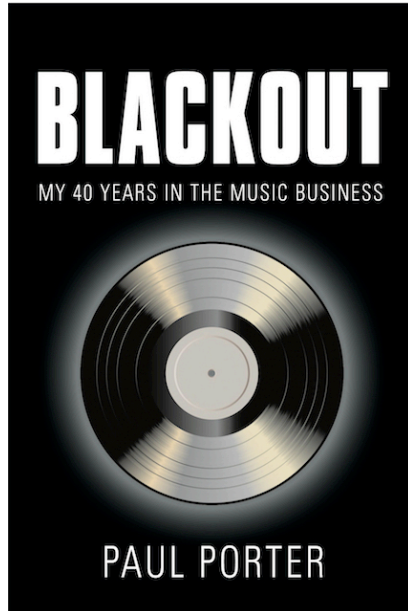
In all honesty, I was basically fired from BET by the staff at the Hotel George. I’d stayed at the hotel for the entire year that I worked at BET. My driver’s license even listed the hotel as my permanent address. My bill was over \$25,000. One morning, the hotel manager called me up and told me that BET was only paying for my stay through the end of the week. I never received anything in writing or even a phone call. I was evicted. And that was how I knew my time at BET was over.

I didn’t know it then, but Bob Johnson was already in discussions with Viacom to sell BET. I believe that’s why Cindy

Mahmoud was moved aside in favor of someone from MTV who could turn the brand into its urban counterpart. It was all about making the station palatable — bringing up the ratings and polishing up the brand to make it a black version of MTV. And Stephen Hill did exactly that. It was like that scene from the movie *Coming to America* when John Amos' character, who owns a McDowell's restaurant, explains how he copied McDonald's and changed it up a bit to avoid being sued. MTV had a wacky man-on-the-street show called "The Tom Green Show," so Stephen Hill created "Hits From The Street." MTV had "Cribs," so Stephen Hill created "How I'm Livin'." MTV had an afternoon countdown show with "TRL," so Stephen Hill created "106 & Park."

I stayed in the hotel for an extra two weeks, trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. I'd spent the last year picking out videos for a music channel. I knew I'd done a good job at it, but it seemed like a no-win situation. I was continually bumping heads with people, and I couldn't manage to just suck it up, toe the corporate line and keep a job like everyone else.

I had a little money in the bank, but I had nowhere to go and no job prospects. Back in Boston, when Steve Crumbley fired me from WILD, I went back to the building the next week, hoping to run into some of my industry buddies who could help me out. By this time, I knew better. I knew that whatever industry connections I had would dry up the moment I checked out of the hotel. BET had gotten exactly what they needed from me. I came in and cleaned up the place after Greg Diggs left unexpectedly. Then, when they were ready for some new blood, I was discarded. None of the promotions people at the labels would be paying for my travel anywhere. No more packages from Karen Kline, and no more rent-free living. My power was gone, and so was the payola. It was time for me to find another job.



An explosive look at the music industry's dark side.

BLACKOUT: My 40 Years in the Music Business

by Paul Porter

Order the complete book from the publisher

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/9204.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**