

Kill The Record Labels

Director: [T. Thomas](#)

Cast: Kid Capri, 50 Cent, Juelz Santana, Maino, Lloyd Banks

(Focus Media)

US DVD release date: 12 May 2009 (Unrworld)

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By [Liz Colville](#)

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In response to falling revenue, the RIAA, a nonprofit organization representing the four largest music label conglomerates, has targeted not only illegal file sharers such as Jammie Thomas and Joel Tenenbaum, but also bootleggers, a nebulous term that might include both hardcore Grateful Dead fans and hip-hop DJs. In the highest profile example of the RIAA's work in this area, the Atlanta office of Aphilliate Music Group, run by mixtape impresarios DJ Drama and DJ Cannon, was raided by police in 2007. Thousands of CDs were confiscated, records and vehicles were seized and 17 people, including Drama and Cannon, were arrested.

Kill The Record Labels, a 45-minute documentary whose content is quite a bit more nuanced than its title, opens with a Fox News report of the raid. The next 40 minutes flit from soundbite to soundbite: observations and opinions from underground hip-hop artists, mixtape DJs and the odd ex-music executive. He who speaks the least—50 Cent—looms largest in the hip-hop world and, not surprisingly, on the DVD cover. He famously made it above ground with the help of something in the range of 100 mixtape tracks, but his lone contribution to the film is “I’m rich — that’s how it’s changed,” in response to an off-camera question whose content we can only guess at.

You can’t buy that kind of publicity—not legally, at least, says the RIAA. Aphilliate wasn’t complying with business regulations, but for the peers who witnessed the raid, the event had bigger ramifications. The big bad four—Warner, Sony BMG, Universal and EMI- - were “trying to stop hip-hop,” as Mike Jones puts it. It’s like “a drug game”, the way the police are going after hip-hop, New Jersey’s DJ Lazy K, the sole woman in the film, adds.

Artists are already “slaves on a slave ship”, DJ Blackstar says. Without mixtapes, the only marketing campaigns they have are the ones their label sanctions. Artists are beholden to the decisions of the labels to the point that they don’t even know how many

albums they sell, according to an anonymous ex-music executive who speaks from the shadows with his voice disguised.

Most artists and DJs believe that if artists give DJs consent to use their material, it should be allowed. The strict rules and routines that the labels put in place isn't exciting for any fan who possesses one iota of curiosity about music, nor is it helpful for an artist trying to make it to the big time. "DJs started hip-hop. You can't destroy the foundation," says Jeff Weintraub, an entertainment lawyer working for the artists.

The volume of material that DJs release helps create buzz around an artist and also delivers much more to fans. Getting tracks from a DJ is simply better, one DJ says, than suffering through dismal mainstream radio rotation or buying an artist's full album. Mixtapes allow for "try before you buy", except you're paying the DJ. No one except the RIAA appears to have a problem with that business model.

"People want fresh stuff. They don't want prepackaged stuff," says Sickamore, the ex-A&R director for Atlantic Records, home to T.I., Plies and Lupe Fiasco. He resigned from the position in February of 2008 because he "lost faith in the major label system," as he put it at the time ("[Sickamore resigns as Atlantic Records' Director of A&R](#)," *Hip Hop DX*, 16 February 2008).

The Brooklyn native's story isn't told in the documentary, but is worth summarizing here. He began making mixtapes for his classmates and opened up a store when he was still a teenager. His sagacity immediately comes through in the film. He intimated to the online magazine *Hip Hop DX* that he was fed up with the labels' bureaucracy, citing the example of Saigon's album *The Greatest Story Never Told*, which, "ironically", *Hip Hop DX* notes, was slated for release "years ago" and still hasn't materialized.

The film moves chronologically, pausing for brief lessons on relevant developments in the past few years: the establishment of the [Mixtape Awards](#) in 1995 by the late Justo Faison, for example, or the establishment of the "Hip Hop Police", a rumored NYPD task force that an anonymous ex-cop tells us does, in fact, exist. At one point a vaguely official-looking filmed meeting between RIAA employees has one of them saying that the police can use the underground music scene to get to criminals.

Several artists describe police as ever-present outside release after-parties and other events, though a few others defend police presence because it's often motivated by potentially dangerous hip-hop rivalries. The ex-cop claims he started the hip-hop task force after the death of Biggie Smalls.

The Internet isn't spared in the film's critical examination of where underground hip-hop is going. Only DJ Lazy K seems to see it as a good thing. Contributing smarts from the back seat of her car, she notes that the Internet is helping lower costs: everything is distributed "by e-mail", she says. Nothing has to be pressed, packaged or shipped anymore.

But S-One laments that if Web-based vehicles such as MySpace Music are swooping in to revolutionize the mixtape industry, they aren't worthy successors. Online fans are "anonymous" — the interactions are incomparable to the handshakes and smiles that happen on the street, in stores, and in clubs.

On top of that, others say, the Internet encourages DJs to make tracks and throw them up quickly and in large quantities. Quality plummets and the online scene becomes oversaturated. And some DJs and artists, naturally, don't have any talent. "Most of the mixtapes are the same," S-One adds. "The mixtape game ain't the same."

Anyone quickly passing over this film because of its brevity and inaccurate cover — it is not about 50 Cent, though his story is clearly one of the most inspiring in the mixtape world — is missing something. The words of people like DJ Lazy K, a grateful and hardworking mixtape creator, illustrate how well underground hip-hop is doing, if the RIAA would just leave them alone. Their marketing strategies are unflashy, highly subjective, and have more potential to go viral than a lot of the boring ideas the labels have up their sleeves.

The biggest concerns of the film's subjects are that the RIAA and the feds are barking up the wrong tree, and that quality and star power is being dictated by everybody and anybody but fans. Fortunately, a lot of music fans have the exact same concerns.

[Rating:](#) 

— 17 August 2009