

Required Reading

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Photo by @notachance

Co-founder, Stomp Down & Manager, Maxo Kream
From Houston, Texas



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In this edition of *Required Reading* - an online zine made to be downloaded and applied to your own career - **Toby Oniyitan** of Houston's **Stomp Down** explains how he and his circle grew a music business enterprise out of Houston and how his unique background in the industry puts him in position to support Texas artists, while based in Texas, rather than sending them to the East or West coast to become successful.

“What am I about to do?”

I knew I couldn't do a conventional job.

I went to a private school my last two years of high school, and a lot of my friends were going to be engineers and doctors, and I was just like, “Damn, what am I about to do?” I was really into blogging and the Internet, so I was sure I'd do something cool.

First, my friends and I wanted to open up a clothing retail company. The plan was to do a Houston version of Karmaloop and call it Friendly Neighborhood Dope Dealers - FNDD. We were really excited about that, but we just never did it.

I was always close to Maxo [Kream]. He's my cousin, we grew up together. He was rapping, and I was always giving him advice. He would always tell me to shut up. We'd always argue, always get into it. I'd give my two cents on what he should be doing, and sometimes he'd listen, sometimes he wouldn't.

When I was in college, he started to get a further into his career as the Internet started to take off. I introduced a close friend of mine, Thumay, the one who pretty much made the blueprint for the FNDD online store, to Maxo. They knew each other because we were all from the same area. He had the blueprint for Maxo. He knew exactly what Maxo should do. He just really understood artists. He and Maxo started getting things going but Thumay didn't like traveling. Maxo would have shows and would just go on his own, so I began to join him.

Maxo Kream management

One time, Maxo had some shows in New York, and I ended up flying with him. The moment we landed there, the promoter was suddenly just like, “The show's canceled, I'm not paying you.”

I think Maxo instantly started to threaten the promoter [on the phone]. I took the phone from Maxo, and I just started to talk to [the promoter]. Before I knew it, the guy not only sent Maxo his balance - he committed to three more shows that he was doing in Connecticut and New Hampshire. He pretty much offered us a higher number than what Maxo was negotiating for himself.

Instantly Maxo said, “You should be my road manager.” At this time, I'm a sophomore in college, and I'm just like, perfect! I instantly went to Instagram, and changed my bio to “Maxo Kream management.” That's all I wanted. That conversation I had with the promoter kind of showed me that I knew how to talk. I finally realized what my skill was.

We were in New York for four more days, and I realized that I could introduce Maxo to people. I started talking to random people, finding out what was going on, what parties there were, what studios to go to. In these four days, we made so many connections. From then on, I just learned the business through Maxo.

As humans, if we have our backs against the wall or we have to defend ourselves, we are able to do things that we didn't know that we could do. With Maxo, I always had to defend myself because he's my older cousin, so I had to really earn respect for my decision-making abilities and my ability to have his best interests at heart because Maxo wasn't very trusting at all. He had very terrible trust issues, as most black men do. He didn't trust anybody with his business.

Adjusting to life as a manager

I had to work very hard, learn a lot of things, meet a lot of people, and always try to problem solve, make things happen, and bring opportunities to the table. I wanted to show that I could do this, that I'm smart, that I know what I'm doing. I had to show that time and time again. Because I had to work so hard doing that, I learned so much about the business.

I met a lot of people because I was seeking that validation in my job. I started to realize that I wanted to work with more people too. I remember being with [Playboi] Carti very early on. I would always act like I was so busy. "I'm busy, bro. I can't go out or do whatever you're trying to do," or "I can't be in the studio with you all night. I'm busy, I'm busy." And he'd be like, "Bro, you only have one artist. Who do you think you are?"

I took that to heart. *laughs* I opened up to working with other artists from that point on. I didn't want to just build one thing with one artist. I wanted to have different people to work with because I felt like I had different musical tastes. I wasn't just listening to rap or R&B only, I liked every kind of music.

Thumay and I started to develop other artists in Houston and get our names out there as managers. Meanwhile, Maxo was really bubbling. We dropped two projects independently. I was learning the business because I had to run everything like a label. Every dollar had to go back into the company. We had to invest in our own videos. I was looking for sponsors. There was all this stuff that I was doing for Maxo while I was developing other artists. Around this time, I started to realize that if I could do this for Maxo independently — understand the business of streaming, get cool with Spotify and Apple, and meet people in these spaces — I could run a record label myself.

Being aware of how playlisting works helped us build out our touring, our merch, and our overall business.

Meeting Tay-K and future partner Ezra Averill

I started to hear about Tay-K, who was in Dallas. I knew he had managers that a friend of mine from New Jersey was cool with. I called my boy in New Jersey, and I'm like, "Yo, I want to be introduced to Tay-K's team. I hear they're doing it on their own." I don't know how I knew that Ezra [Averill] was doing it by himself, but for some reason, I knew they didn't have a label or even a real adult around.

I get introduced to Ezra, and I drive down to Dallas to go meet with him. He and his partner, Blue, were working together for Tay. I knew a lot of the labels, I was making a lot of industry connections, but I didn't have anything else. (Knowing people and being able to call people for help if needed, being able to ask for advice, is everything in the music industry. I learned that pretty damn early.)

At this time, every single label wanted to sign Tay-K. His situation was so unique, it was so messy - he's a kid, he's young, and there is this controversy around him. He wasn't signed yet, and he was streaming like crazy. In my opinion, Tay-K was one of the first streaming phenomenons in hip-hop that was unsigned. It wasn't happening like that before. This is right when hip-hop started really booming, and everybody that was booming was pretty much signed.

People were just trying to take advantage of the situation - you have a young black kid who's making millions of dollars from streaming, so we had to fight every inch of the way. We went through so many things that I can't speak on, and it was just so crazy how we had to maneuver the situation. At the end of the day, despite the controversy and all the things he was going through, he was a kid. Bro was 16.

For me, it wasn't about the business. I couldn't see him get screwed over. Once we fought through, we ended up getting him a solid deal. I felt like he was happy, he had control, and he was comfortable once he got through that.

The start of Stomp Down

Me and Ezra felt like we worked really well together, and that we should keep doing it. We spoke to so many different major labels, so I finally was able to do the one thing that I hadn't done yet in the industry. Like I said, I did everything else. I booked shows, I understood streaming, we had PR, and I understood every other facet of the business for the most part, but I did not understand the label system. I didn't understand lawyers. I didn't understand retainer fees. I didn't understand royalty deals. I didn't understand what recoupment meant. I didn't know anything about anything.

My introduction to all of it was with Tay-K, so that was like me graduating. I was ready to start a label or a company. I always had the name Stomp Down in my head because I liked the way it sounded. I knew I wanted the company to have a hard name, like Def Jam, Cash Money, No Limit, Rap-A-Lot, Death Row, and Bad Boy. It all sounded really cool because it all represented a culture.

I wanted my company to have a culture. Ezra loved the name, and from there, we just never stopped.

Literally two weeks after we [thought of] the name Stomp Down, Ezra did a Forbes interview, and he was like, "Yeah, me and Toby just started a label called Stomp Down. We have all these artists, we're going to take over. We're the hottest thing in the game."

Forbes printed all of this. Type in "Ezra Averill, Forbes interview" and you're going to see all this stuff. I swear to God. When he did this interview, we only had one conversation about Stomp Down. At that point, I was just like, "Yo, we have to see this through." He kind of forced my hand. So, we just hit the ground running.

The Texas company

We moved to LA. We were just trying to make it work. We did the Tay-K deal, then I did Maxo's record deal and publishing deal. We were just chasing deals. After a while, I realized we had to start a business, it had to be a company.

We moved to LA from Houston, but in LA, we were in all these rooms and people would be like, “Yo, he’s a Texas guy. These guys are from Houston and Dallas.” People knew us as that. They were referring to us as the Texas company and the Texas guys, but how could we say that and not live in Houston? I told our team, “Yo, we gotta pack our bags and go back to Houston. We can't live in LA anymore.”

From then on, we truly started operating fully like a company. Every day we learned something different. I think that's what it means to truly be in the business - being able to adapt. I just told a very fast-tracked version of eight or nine years. In those years, the business has changed and turned over 100 times.

It's different in business

It took me a long time to figure out how to have a real balance of running a business, but still be a people person. I realized it's about separation. When I was a bit younger, I was all-in on everything. I couldn't allow myself to have a balance.

I would take things so personally in the beginning, like, "You're my friend, why are you giving me a little offer? We just had drinks last night." I'd be so pissed. I had to understand that somebody could be my friend, but in business, it's different. In business, I can't take things too personally and I have to let people who are my friends know that they shouldn't take my business personally either.

Like I said, I'd be all in on everything, mixing friendship and business. I don't know how to not be friends with my artists. I always would get advice from mentors who were a lot older than me, and they'd tell me that managers can't be friends with their artists. I'd always hear that in the beginning, but I have to be friends with my artists.

Being friends with my artists can be tough because we can go from talking about a release and future plans to then talking about why our moms are pissing us off all in the same conversation.

Doing the unexpected

I don't feel like we've reached success. I feel like we're doing well, and I can acknowledge that God is good, but when I think of success, I look at such a high level. I look at the legends. I look at David Geffen's or Jimmy Iovine's — people who started independent companies and made them worldwide. That's what I want. I want my artists to all become superstars. I want them to be household names.

That's what I want from Stomp Down. I want it to be a company that's here long after I'm old and gray and don't even know a single note, and music hurts my ears. We started Stomp Down as a company that will take the best creatives in Houston, and we'll continue to find the best creatives in Houston, the best creatives in Texas, and work with them.

I wanted to make it seem like as an artist, you don't have to leave Houston. You have a real company here. You can go up the street and go to an office. You go up the street and go to a studio and have everything you need. If you want to create a movie, you can. If you want to make a clothing line, you can. Whatever you want as a creative, as an artist, you can do in-house, you don't have to leave Houston.

I want to be able to take what we do in music by being nimble and thinking outside the box and being able to not do what's expected of us. I love that about Stomp Down. You never know what to expect from us. You never know if we're going to have a Spanish singer or we're going to have an alien crip who can rap about the newest fashion. It's weird. We have a punk rock band. I'm a Nigerian who works with a punk rock band. That's not very common.

I love that you'll never expect that. You'll never see us coming.



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