

# SHAWN GEE

## REPRESENTING BLACK CULTURE AS A CAREER

Shawn Gee flexes both shrewd business sense and abundant creativity as President of **Live Nation Urban** and as a partner in Live Nation's **Maverick Management**, where he's built a sterling 20-year career that started by guiding the careers of **The Roots** and **Jill Scott**, both natives of his hometown of Philadelphia. Two decades later, Gee still manages all aspects of their careers.

Gee has cultivated particular expertise in the business of live touring and music festivals, and at the helm of Live Nation Urban, he is breaking new ground for hip-hop, R&B and gospel artists while also producing big-ticket events like **The Roots Picnic**, **Broccoli City Festival**, **R&B Summer Block Party**, **BET Experience**, **Lights On Festival**, **Miami Jazz in the Gardens** and **Kirk Franklin's Exodus Festival**.

Gee aims to inspire the community at large and particularly to move Black entrepreneurs to "break the glass ceiling" of the biz. His most powerful argument lies in his own story.

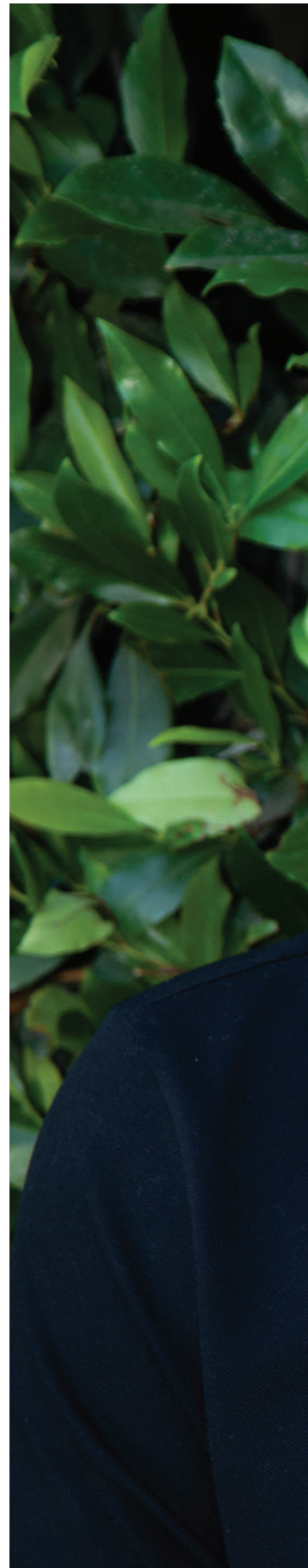




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INTERVIEW BY BY LARRY FLICK



*Shawn with Black Thought and Questlove of The Roots*

**Let's go back to your earliest days in Philadelphia. How would you describe your boyhood?**

It's a great place to grow up. I had a relatively normal childhood. I was heavily into sports. I played basketball. In fact, I received a basketball scholarship to a Division Two university in Central Pennsylvania.

**Why didn't you pursue it professionally?**

A year into being a collegiate basketball player, my first son was born. Life kicked in really young for me. But I did not drop out of school; I continued my education. It was a blessing that I was able to continue school full time. I also had two jobs, from my sophomore to senior years. Becoming a father at that age was definitely not part of the plan, but it was definitely a blessing. It forced me to mature earlier than a lot of my friends and peers. It instilled a level of hustle that I saw in my mother. She always had two jobs, and she had a real estate hustle on the side. Because of her, the hustle was innately in me. When I had my son in college, that's when the hustle came out of me.

**So many young men freak out and run away from such a mature situation. You chose parenthood and responsibility. How did you keep your priorities in line?**

My son's mother and I had the kind of foundation that allowed us to live our lives and continue to attend school. We got great support from her parents and from my mom.

**Where in the mix of being a new dad, a college student and working two jobs did you rearrange your dreams away from sports and toward a different career path?**

I completed my undergraduate studies with an accounting degree, not knowing what that meant. I was always good with numbers, so I got a job with what

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is now known as **Verizon** in sales. That was the antithesis of where I viewed myself. But I took the gig to challenge myself. It helped me sharpen some interpersonal skills, but it wasn't where I wanted to be in life. I ended up going back to school at **George Washington University** to get my MBA. It was about setting short-term goals; tracking up to reaching those goals and when



*Production Manager Rebekah Foster, ColorCreative Management head Talitha Watkins, artist/producer D-Nice, Shawn and attorney Corrine Cater; Shawn with Jill Scott*

you're close to reaching them, setting another one. It was all about pushing forward. At the time, I was working full time at the phone company. I'm in grad school full time. And I'm traveling back and forth from school to Philadelphia to pick my son up on weekends. It was hard, but it gave me more options in life. When I finished school, I got a job on Wall Street at **Citibank**. I was 26 at the time, and Citibank was an old-money bank. They didn't feel comfortable putting me in front of their old-money clients, so I was focused on second-generation wealthy people. Citibank had a lot of second-generation money people in Europe, which is where I had a better chance of building my book of business. I divided my time between New York and Zurich. After a while, I realized that this wasn't my passion. I felt like I was walking in someone else's footsteps and not building my own purpose. This wasn't my dream.

Then one day, I received a call from a gentleman named **Richard Nichols**. At that time, he was the manager of a band from Philadelphia, **The Roots**. **Tariq "Black Thought" Trotter**, the lead vocalist, is my cousin. We grew up as brothers. We even lived together for several years. As he was in the band, growing and bubbling in the music scene, I was doing the same thing academically and professionally. I was always around them. I was the cousin who would come to the show and hang backstage. But then they'd leave on their tour bus, while I went home to get up early for work. There was a good relationship with Richard and the whole band.

Then one day, Richard invited me to the old **Sony** studios on 54th Street in New York. He told me that he needed my help with building the band's business infrastructure, as well as dealing with various aspects of their career that were keeping him from the creative aspects. I say "yes," and for a while, I did my day job and worked with the band at the same time.

I remember that he gave me two phone numbers. He gave me the number to **The Roots'** booking agent, **Cara Lewis**, who 20-plus years later is still our booking agent. And he gave me the number to the A&R admin at the label. That's how I got into the music business. Six months after having that first meeting with Richard, I walked into my management director's office at the bank and resigned. From there, I was working with **The Roots** full time.

**"THE FIRST LIVE SHOW THAT I ATTENDED WAS THE FRESH FESTIVAL AT THE SPECTRUM IN PHILADELPHIA, AND IT HAD RUN-DMC AND THE FAT BOYS. THERE WERE 15,000 OF US IN AN ARENA. I SAW THE ELECTRICITY OF THAT EVENT AND I KNEW ANYTHING WAS POSSIBLE."**

**So you went from a seemingly safe direction in banking into a tough, insecure business with a band that is largely unclassifiable. Was that the ultimate enticement for you, working with a band that was forging a very different road?**

The challenge was definitely something that enticed me. Back then, success was relative. At that point, success was booking a gig at a lounge or a festival in the U.K. When Richard placed the challenge in front of me, and I started dealing with Cara Lewis and understanding touring and understanding how the business works; that was sort of a business Rubik's cube. I believed that I could solve business issues, and I had two of the most talented individuals in the world as partners. Our goal at the beginning was for the guys to be able to make a living from their art. It wasn't lofty; we just wanted them not to need day jobs to pay their rent.

**When did you feel your vision and your ambition shift? Everything up to this point was informed by a desire to advance their dreams. When did you start to develop your own personal visions?**

There are tent poles in my career, and really important people who helped me. The ultimate tent pole was that call I got from Richard Nichols, and the trust I got from Tariq and The Roots. Then there was Jill Scott, who was my second client out of Philadelphia. I was new in the industry, but they gave me the chance to learn. They gave me the chance to make mistakes.

The second tent pole was in 2004, when **Donda West** and **Gee Roberson** brought me into the **Kanye West** business early and entrusted me with the responsibility of helping strategize and build out the vision that Kanye had for his live business. From the first college tour [**School Spirit**] up through **Glow in the Dark** and **Watch the Throne**. Ms. West and Gee Roberson allowed me to learn the touring business at the highest levels with global arena tours.

From there, it was [business manager/boxing agent] **Al Haymon**, the smartest person I ever met. He's a **Harvard** graduate who showed me that a Black man can reach the pinnacle of success in the live touring business. He is aspirational and inspiring. Al pushed me and taught me the touring business from the "buy" side of the business. He also ingrained in me the



*With Kirk Franklin and artist/actor Serayah McNeill*

importance of representing Black culture both with the artists we choose to promote on the stage as well as the business and production teams that we hire behind the stage.

And then there's **Michael Rapino**, the CEO and President of Live Nation Entertainment. In this phase of my career, Michael has invested in my vision. He did what not many others would ever do: He put up the capital to fund the crazy ideas that I have. As an equity partner, that gives me the autonomy to build the business as I choose to. He also listened, which is important,

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as I gave him my perspective on the systemic racial issues that exist in live music. He not only listened, but he empowered me to try and find some solutions.

**When you connect these dots, when did you see hip-hop music could go from being a massive recording entity to being an equally successful touring entity?**

The first live show that I attended was the Fresh Festival at the Spectrum in Philadelphia, and it had Run-DMC and The Fat Boys. There were 15,000 of us in an arena. I saw the electricity of that event and I knew anything was possible.

**How do you feel about the differentiation that comes with the word “urban”?**

There’s a lot of conversation around the word because one of the record labels came out and said they were not going to use it anymore. For me, there’s nothing wrong with the word. I specifically called my company Live Nation Urban, because I wanted to differentiate. Live Nation is a huge conglomerate of a matrix that you can get lost within. I wanted to specify that my focus is hip-hop, R&B, gospel and Black culture. I wanted to call attention to the power of Black art and creatives.

This is my calling. The 15 to 20 years of my career is what God was setting me up for—to really try to make a difference, and to make a dent in the paradigm, this infrastructure that exists that is systemically racist. With Live Nation Urban, I’m building festivals and shows and partnerships with artists and brands. But the true purpose is to make a difference across the board.

**What do you tell the people who come to work for you?**

That I’m intentionally and authentically Black. That’s not saying anything about the people who consume what we produce. Consumption is open to everyone; anyone can buy a ticket and enjoy a show. Anyone can log onto a livestream. We’re open to everyone who appreciates Black culture. But the perspective that we’re building—from the business infrastructure to the people that we’re hiring—is intentionally and authentically Black.

We didn’t have this opportunity when I stepped on the live side. I’m not talking about 1970s, coming out of the civil rights era. I’m talking about 2017, 2018. When I stepped on the live side, we weren’t present at all. We weren’t present in the agency business, not on the buyer side, not the vendors, not at the venues, not even in the concession business. Now that I have the ability to have an impact, I’m going to impact it any way that I can. I’m hoping that, from the seeds that I’ve planted, the next generation will have more opportunities than we had. That’s my goal.

**One last question: What have you told your first son about the impact that his birth had on your direction in life?**

We’ve had the conversation several times. We grew up together. He saw the hustle. He saw the hard decisions. I like to think that what he saw and experienced has had a major impact on him. He’s having a great career as a sports agent, and he’s building a trajectory based on education and passion. I would like to think that he learned from me. But I can say definitively that he was my motivation from the very beginning. ■



*With Black Thought; with Questlove*