

# STEVEN VICTOR

## PREPARATION MEETS OPPORTUNITY

INTERVIEW BY MILES MARSHALL LEWIS

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hen compared with Black record executives who came to prominence in the pre-streaming era, some of today's African American label heads tend to keep a relatively lower profile. As a **Morehouse College** senior, **Steven Victor**—CEO of **Victor Victor Worldwide**—was familiar with some of his illustrious predecessors in a way that current students may not be with Victor himself. But even without a flamboyant public image, he's making history.

This 41-year-old Haitian-American from Brooklyn launched his career straight out of Morehouse by interning (for free) at **Interscope**, rising up the label's public relations ranks. Managing **Pusha T** led Victor to an appointment as the COO of **Kanye West's G.O.O.D. Music**. All of which and more resulted in the founding of both **Victor Victor Worldwide** (where he signed **Pop Smoke**) and the **William Victor Management Group**, a firm that handles **The-Dream** and **Pusha T**, among others.





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## “I WAS ALWAYS LOOKING FOR OPPORTUNITY. NOT NECESSARILY PAID, BUT OPPORTUNITIES FOR INFORMATION AND TO LEARN.”

*Karen Kwak,  
Tamir Grinberg,  
Lorraine Schwartz  
and Victor*

**You attended Morehouse College in Atlanta. Did the city help shape your music ear?**

I didn't like Atlanta. I guess I'm just so used to New York's pace, to things being so difficult in New York. In Atlanta, things were so easy—you could live in a nice area, have a nice car, and it's relatively inexpensive. You can't do that in New York. I just felt like things in Atlanta were so accessible. That could be a good thing, but for me, it was kinda like, “Hmm. I don't know if this is the pace for me.”

**I ask because of the local influence in Atlanta of the record labels of Jermaine Dupri and Dallas Austin, and even Magic City strip club, which had an influence on Future's music.**

What's crazy is that I never actually went to the strip clubs down there or anything like that. I was kinda in my own bubble. I didn't really go out like that.

**If you had to explain the modern trends in hip-hop music to the execs of a previous era, how would you do it?**

Where it's at right now is a very stream-of-consciousness vibe. In hip-hop at least, a lot of the music that's coming out is...thoughts. These rappers are just putting their thoughts on wax. It doesn't necessarily have to rhyme; it just has to go with whatever emotion they're feeling—whether that's a melodic thing or not. But I think it's headed in a different direction. Not to say that what they're doing is not real music, but I think it's gonna go back to a place where music is more thoughtful. Right now, it's very emotional. But if you're able to get out your emotional thought in 45 seconds, that's the song. It could be a minute song, a two-minute song, however long it takes to get your thought out is what you get. I feel like in the future, it's gonna go back to how it was with real songs.



**If you had to point out specific artists who exemplify what you just said, who would you mention?**

NBA YoungBoy is probably the best example and one of my favorites out of artists out right now in that space I'm describing.

**What music would you play for prior generations of music execs to help them understand hip-hop in 2021?**

These albums that I'm gonna mention, they



*Victor with Pop Smoke*

don't necessarily fall in the pocket of that. They kind of ride the spectrum. Some of the songs on this album do fit what I'm talking about, but these are a little bit more throw-backs. I would probably say Pop Smoke's *Shoot for the Stars, Aim for the Moon* and ? from XXXTentacion.

**What Verzuz match-up are you dying to see, and which has been your favorite?**

[Laughter] I wanna see Puff and Dre, then I wanna see a three-way. I wanna see Puff, Dre and Pharrell, maybe. Then I wanna see a

Verzuz with just Kanye West. He's in a world of his own, and he could play his records versus records he's produced for other people. My favorite one was The Lox and Diplomats. I was always a huge fan of both of those groups. I really enjoyed the Lox's performance, how on point they were. Not to say that the Diplomats weren't on point. But it really made me appreciate The Lox. I feel like that's what the Verzuzes are supposed to do: make you appreciate those artists.

**What first attracted you to sign the late, great Pop Smoke?**

Him, really. Because when I signed him, he was just playing me different vibes. He didn't really have any songs; he just had the talent. It was everything about him. I just felt like his talent, his passion. When you meet a superstar, you *know*. I feel like that's my God-given ability, to be able to identify talent at that level. I met him through his manager, Rico Beats, in January-ish of 2019. We were in New York in Rico's office. I actually took the meeting as a favor to Rico. I didn't know that I was meeting a superstar. I knew he was bringing me Pop Smoke, because he was managing him. But after I met him, I just knew he was the one.

**In deciding to branch out with the William Victor Management Group, was there a model that provided the template? Russell Simmons's Rush Artist Management, for example?**

You know what? It was actually this guy named Chris Smith. He had a company called Chris Smith Management, and he managed Nelly Furtado. I worked on the Nelly Furtado project with him as a publicist back in the early 2000s, the *Loose* project. I just remember he was so on point with everything, so smart. To me at least, I feel like he had all the attributes of a management company that I wanted. I had never worked with someone that thorough on all levels: the creative, the business. His perspective was always global. He never was thinking about [only] the U.S.

I became really close with him and I just watched him take that project from zero to 10 very deliberately. He had the plan, he put the plan together and he made sure it was executed to a T. [*Loose*] sold 10 million records worldwide. It only sold maybe 2 million records in the U.S., but everywhere else, it sold millions of records. I wanted to

model my company on that: Being a global company and being able to execute things at the highest level.

**When you graduated from college, who were the record execs who inspired you to get into the industry?**

It was a guy named Haqq Islam who I was interning for. He had a record label [University] at Universal. Dru Hill and Mýa were signed to him; they were the popular

acts that were on his label. He was African American, and I was roommates with his son at college—that’s how I met him. He was the first person to give me an internship. That was my entry into the music business, through Haqq. He was the CEO of his own label; he had those acts signed to him.

**You launched the Victor Victor Foundation for philanthropy. What’s the focus of the organization?**

Education in urban communities.

**Where did you grow up?**

Brooklyn, New York. Canarsie, Flatbush.

**How were you exposed to music back then, and who were some of your favorites?**

My parents are from Haiti, and I grew up in Brooklyn. My father used to listen to country music, so there’s that. Also, I used to listen to a lot of reggae: Beres Hammond, Bounty Killer, Barrington Levy. My early rap was A Tribe Called Quest. My older sister [Melissa Victor]

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Victor with UMPG’s Walter Jones, “Old Town Road” producer Kio, collaborator Cash MoneyAP and attorney Jess Rosen





Victor with Fetty Luciano and Pop Smoke

“[POP SMOKE] DIDN'T REALLY HAVE ANY SONGS; HE JUST HAD THE TALENT. IT WAS EVERYTHING ABOUT HIM. I JUST FELT LIKE HIS TALENT, HIS PASSION. WHEN YOU MEET A SUPERSTAR, YOU KNOW.”

PHOTO: JOHNNY NUÑEZ/WIREIMAGE

put me on to **Mobb Deep**, interestingly enough. She actually works in music too; she works in the publicity department at **Epic**. My musical tastes have always been wild. From country music to reggae to pop. I was a huge **Madonna** fan also. I was all over the place.

**What was your first concert ever?**

Oh man, I probably didn't go to a concert until... **Foxy Brown** might've been my first concert. She rocked it; it was crazy.

**They say success happens when preparation meets opportunity. Were you always prepared for the opportunities that have come to you?**

Yeah, I was always looking for opportunity. Not necessarily paid, but opportunities for information and to learn. I interned at **Interscope** for free for two years after college. Initially working for **The Clipse**, I worked for them for free. A lot of things I did early on, I did just for the opportunity.

I just want to mention that a lot of stuff that I learned from a business standpoint was from a guy named **Tony Draper** from **Suave House Records**. Before I was managing **The Clipse**, before I was managing **Pusha T**, I was their publicist. **Tony Draper** was their manager, and his background is, he had his own record label super early on—back when **Master P [No Limit]** and **Cash Money** first started popping off. He really gave me all the information as it related to the music business.

He owned his label, so he did things himself. He spent his own money. Whenever I had any questions about the music business, I always asked **Draper**. My perspective has always been his perspective, in the sense that you gotta treat everything as if it's your own money. Don't treat the label's money like it's their money; you gotta treat everything like it's yours. I've always had that perspective. I feel like that's one of the most important things as a young executive or a young manager—to be able to handle business from that perspective. Don't ever look at it as you're taking advantage of this or that person. You gotta put yourself in your partner's shoes. Because essentially, if you're managing an act on the label, that's your partner. Or if you're a 50-50 partner with a label, that's your partner. You have to treat them as though they're you. That's something very important that I learned from **Draper**. ■